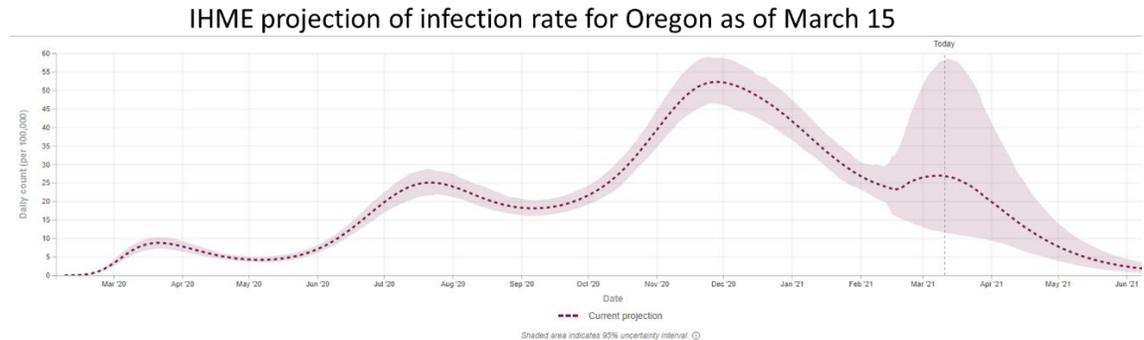


# A way to use data to help decide when to reconvene in person

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Most of our churches are still meeting at a distance, using streaming, Zoom, FaceBook, et al. But **COVID numbers have started to drop locally**, and model projections indicate further significant drops in the near future.



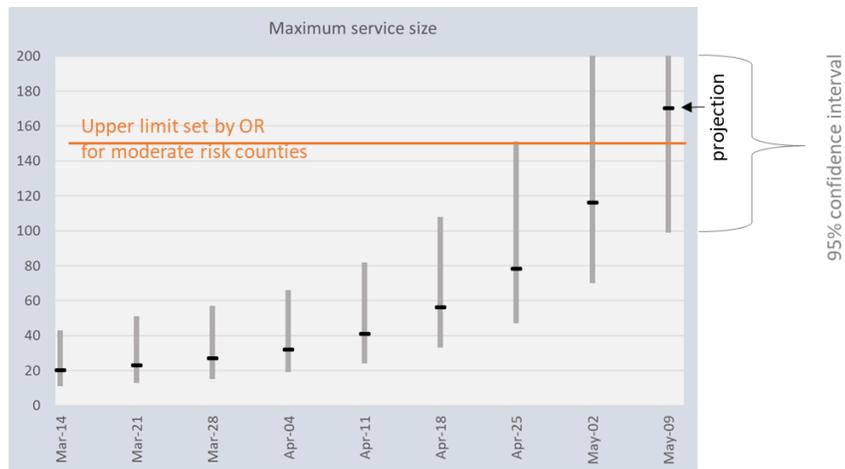
Is it time to reconvene in-person services or not? How do we make such a momentous decision? Should we trust to the head pastor’s intuition, pray and vote, get out the Urim and Thummim, or what? I encourage churches to employ a quantitative measure as at least part of their decision process. Such an external measure can reduce bias, and when we’re talking about a decision that could affect human life, we want to be as careful and unbiased as we can.

The measure I propose is easily stated: What’s the probability of having an infection-free service? At First Presbyterian Church in Portland (FPC PDX), we’ve set a criterion: We won’t reconvene unless that probability exceeds 99%. That is pretty straightforward in principle, and it makes sense. This measure doesn’t address how the virus travels in our sanctuary, but merely whether the virus is present.

Simple as that measure is, it is fairly complicated to calculate. The details of the data collection and equation aren’t important here, but are available on request. What’s more important right now is that you see one of the possible decision products. The plot below addresses the question “How many people can attend on each date and still keep our service COVID-free with over a 99% probability?”

You can see, for example, that on April 25, we can bring an estimated 77 people together, with an uncertainty ranging from 47 to 149 people. That’s tremendously useful information for us. We know there’s always going to be some risk from COVID, but we’ve now got some sense of both the size of the risk and the size of the service. Imagine looking at such a plot and deciding whether there’s benefit in postponing another week or so, or dropping the service size by 20 folks.

## Maximum service size projections (specific to FPC)



The numbers shown here are specific to FPC in Portland and will change as better information comes in, so don't apply this graph to your own church. However, with a bit of work and guesswork, we could find the data for your own congregation and generate a similar product. The next step in exploring your options is to contact Pete Vanden Bosch at [petevandenbosch@gmail.com](mailto:petevandenbosch@gmail.com).