

Honorable Tim Walz
Governor
State of Minnesota
130 State Capitol
St. Paul, MN 55155



May 8, 2020

RE: Protocols for Safely Allowing Religious Gatherings

Thank you for your compassionate leadership of our state during the COVID-19 crisis. As leaders of evangelical denominations, we eagerly anticipate the day when worship gatherings of our respective faith communities can safely resume. Like you we are committed to ensuring the health and well-being of members of our congregations.

We appreciate your broad outreach and engagement with many religious leaders over the past week as your administration works toward developing guidance for resuming religious services and public worship gatherings – we hope this will be in the very near future. We have set forth some basic guidance for doing so, and seek your encouragement for opening up public worship gatherings slowly and safely, consistent with state and local safety guidelines relating to COVID-19.

We are eager to work with your administration to develop practices and guidelines for religious services. These guidelines would be broadly applicable to a wide variety of practices and physical settings represented within each of our denominations, as well as applicable to many other forms of religious practice in Minnesota.

Collectively we represent more than 1,000 evangelical churches in Minnesota serving nearly 500,000 worshippers. As we have individually consulted with pastors in local congregations of different sizes, meeting in a wide variety of physical settings, we recommend the following practices to ensure safe worship gatherings:

- Churches will maintain social distancing guidelines through a variety of practices such as rearranging or reducing seating, reducing the percentage of total occupancy that is utilized, or setting maximum group sizes that can be safely accommodated while maintaining appropriate social distance.
- Churches will employ creative and careful procedures to ensure gathering size and facility capacity adhere to public safety guidelines.
- Permit drive-in or outdoor worship gatherings in settings where this may be the easiest and safest way to observe necessary social distancing.
- Implement no-touch protocols for all aspects of public worship gatherings, i.e. doors propped or held open by volunteers, no passing of offering plates, adapt communion and other religious rites to ensure safety, discontinue beverage and food service during communal times, avoid customary hugs, handshakes and other physical greetings.
- Encourage the use of masks as appropriate.
- Depending upon building size and configuration, establish interior one-way traffic flow patterns or provide directional signs to avoid crowded bottlenecks or intersecting crowd movements.
- Conduct thorough cleaning and disinfecting of common surfaces before and after each worship gathering.
- Officiants and worship leaders will be spaced 6-feet apart and will not share common surfaces such as podiums, microphones or liturgical items unless disinfected properly.

- When public restrooms must be used, limit the number of persons allowed inside, create a 6-foot spaced waiting line outside, and ensure that disinfectant or tissues are available after persons touch door handles and common surfaces when exiting.
- Children and youth should remain with their parents and not attend separate children's and youth programming when more restrictive social distancing measures are in place. As group size limits are increased churches could begin to offer separate children's and youth programs implementing social distancing and safety measures similar to practices followed in academic settings such as regular hand washing, minimizing physical touch, coughing/sneezing into one's elbow, and regularly disinfecting any common surface, play objects, or other items children and youth use or touch.

Furthermore, churches will be encouraged to continue offering online worship experiences to be available for those who choose not to attend in-person religious services, and will strongly recommend that elderly persons and persons with co-morbidities not attend public worship gatherings at this time.

We are also concerned about high rates of COVID-19 infection in communities of color, in low income neighborhoods and among vulnerable populations. We stress the urgency of continuing to expand availability of testing especially in communities that are disproportionately affected.

While we recognize the uncertainty of how COVID-19 continues to spread and understand that an exact timeline is unpredictable, providing a plan of action such as the practices listed above, will be of great value to every pastor as they develop plans and contingencies for their specific worship setting.

We will continue to pray for you and your administration during this difficult time.

Sincerely,

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