

Interim Action July 9, 2020

A Statement on COVID-19 Prevention in Houses of Worship from Religious Leaders of the State of New York

We are aware that on Friday, June 26, a U.S. District Judge issued a preliminary injunction prohibiting the New York State government from ordering or enforcing any arbitrary limits placed upon religious gatherings held in outdoor or indoor venues.

We are also aware of news reports that are revealing a disturbing and dramatic rise in the number of Covid-19 cases throughout the United States. The increasing number of positive tests and hospitalizations in dozens of states many times can be attributed to ill-advised gatherings of people who are worshipping indoors and often not engaging in proper social distancing, nor employing recommended sanitation measures, or participating in the disciplined use of face masks covering mouth and nose. After much sacrifice New York infections have stabilized.

As leaders of religious communities and organizations throughout the State of New York, we hope to prevent another increase and unite with a common voice to state the following:

- We will always rely on the analysis of facts and the expertise of medical professionals and scientists to helping us determine when and how to reopen or scale back observances in our sanctuaries, temples, mosques and other worship settings;
- We depend upon the centralized and focused leadership of those in our state government to provide uniform messaging, standards and protocols for the safe and timely reopening of our state, including all houses of worship;
- We pledge to continue to follow the guidance from New York state government and health officials and welcome the intentional steps they have provided for conducting religious and funeral services found within the NY Forward Guidelines;
- While we recognize the importance of our First Amendment right to freedom of religion, we as faith leaders also understand the importance of keeping our worshipping members and those we serve safe. A pandemic is no respecter of persons and thus, this is the time to prioritize the health and safety of all New Yorkers, especially those in high risk categories amongst those who need or want the religious or social services we provide;
- Likewise, we urge our brother and sister religious leaders to comply with the consistent and data driven advice of the overwhelming majority of virus scientists and public health officials and follow New York State's public health emergency experts in curtailing the ill effects of the pandemic.

As religious leaders we celebrate the opportunity to be participants with other leaders in the State of New York as we lessen the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Because of the uncertain nature of the virus and pandemic as well as the reality that we often minister to highly vulnerable and disproportionately affected constituency, as well as in settings that often include activities in the highest transmission risk categories, such as singing, we do not wish to see our houses of worship and other worship spaces placed into any exempt category or treated in any way

different than other businesses or gatherings that assemble people in venues where their health may be adversely affected.

We invite and urge all New York religious leaders, lay and ordained, from all faith communities in their abundant diversity, to join us in creating a consistent witness of the value we place on a human life that is equal to the value we place on the care of a human body and soul.

We stand with Governor Cuomo in stating that, as religious leaders, we too are New York Tough, Smart, Disciplined, and most of all, loving.

Love thy Neighbor - wear a mask, social distance and practice good hygiene.

Signed:

Bishop. Thomas J. Bickerton
Resident Bishop, The New York Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church

The Reverend Dr. Chloe Breyer
Executive Director, Interfaith Center of New York

The Reverend Peter Cook
Executive Director, New York State Council of Churches

The Reverend Que English
Senior Pastor, Bronx Christian Fellowship

Peter B. Gudaitis, M.Div.
Executive Director & CEO, New York Disaster Interfaith Services

Bishop John Macholz
Upstate New York Conference, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America

Rabbi Joe Potasnik
New York Board of Rabbis

Pastor James Richmond, Community Liaison
Seventh Day Adventist Church

Jeffrey Aaron, Presiding Clerk
New York Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

Steve Mohlke, General Secretary
New York Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

LIST IN FORMATION