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## **CHURCHES URGED TO RETURN TO PHYSICALLY DISTANCED MINISTRY**

(STATEWIDE) - The Wisconsin Council of Churches recommends that churches statewide return to remote operations as the COVID-19 crisis deepens in Wisconsin. While today's state Executive Order to limit indoor gatherings to 25% of building capacity exempts religious services and places of worship, and churches are free to continue operations as they have been, the ecumenical organization recommends that they not gather in person.

“Our obligation as faithful people is not to the minimum standard, but to behavior that demonstrates care for the most vulnerable and the well-being of the entire community,” said the Rev. Kerri Parker, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Council of Churches. “In view of the high level of COVID-19 in Wisconsin, it is neither prudent nor pastoral to gather groups of people together at this time. We urge you to put a hold on any plans for worshiping or having fellowship together in physical place for the time being.”

It is estimated that approximately 25% of mainline Protestant churches have been offering worship indoors this fall, with others holding worship outdoors and many continuing worship online. Throughout the pandemic, more than half of Christian churches the Council surveyed have been offering ministry to address the needs of hungry people in Wisconsin, in ways that protect the health and safety of staff, volunteers and people served. Other common church-based programs included health-related ministries such as blood drives, COVID testing and distributing masks for the community.

“Being a faithful people is not abstract; it is about applying our faith when it matters,” continued Rev. Parker. “This virus is not going to get itself under control. We have a responsibility to each other. We are able to worship, pray, provide faith formation and pastoral care, and address other community needs in ways that limit the risk of spreading COVID, to save lives and relieve the strain on the health system. We have a moral imperative to do so.”

The Wisconsin Council of Churches is a network of Christian churches and faith-based organizations committed to working together across differences. Exercising holy imagination, the organization helps its members and friends make courageous choices that lead toward peace with justice, the vitality of the church, and the well-being of neighbors. The ecumenical organization counts twenty Christian traditions representing over 2,000 congregations in its membership, and has been providing information and advice to churches during the COVID-19 public health crisis. Its resources have been shared nationwide.

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