



## **CORONAVIRUS UPDATES INCUDING CLARIFICATIONS ON EXECUTIVE ORDER**

**MARCH 21, 2020**

Thank you for your responses regarding our clarifying e-mail yesterday about Governor Cuomo's Executive Order. What follows are some updates and further clarifications

Again, with regard to Governor Cuomo's **Executive Order**, everyone was ordered to stay in their homes as much as possible and to only leave your home if it is absolutely necessary. Moreover, the Governor said that non-essential employees were asked to stay home from work. Additionally, the Governor offered **guidance on how essential and non-essential employees are defined**. As a Council we wish to clarify the order with the Governor's Office as it relates to public worship.

According to the Governor's Office for Faith Based Initiatives:

1. Faith leaders can continue to record services and live stream using their equipment in their sanctuaries. They are not required to record from home although some pastors may choose to do so.
2. The Governor's office, even with the emergency order in place, has said that "houses of worship are not ordered closed however it is strongly recommended no congregate services be held and social distance maintained" as noted in the definition of essential and non-essential defined above. Some could also discern that, if you do in person worship, it should be with gatherings of no more than 50 people and should take place in a room filled no more than 50% of capacity.

While the Governor slightly relaxed the restriction for in person worship, you should know that most of our judicatories have called on their congregations to cancel all in person worship services to safe guard the health of parishioners and their communities. Furthermore, it is my understanding that New York Disaster Interfaith Services (NYDIS) is strongly recommending that all worship services be virtual.

My own commentary, as one who has served as a pastor in three congregations, is that faith leaders really need to ask themselves, out of love for the people they serve, whether they wish to place parishioners at risk given the recommended abundance of caution and very strict protocols which are in place for other businesses and gathering places. Clergy also have a responsibility to preserve their health and that of their families.

I would suggest alternative pastoral choices at this time might better include phone trees or pastoral calls by phone to the entire membership to check in and determine if there are needs.

Again, this would be a good time to organize a small Covid-19 response team. Messages, prayers and music (as long as it is copyright protected) can be transmitted with something as simple as a smart phone or use of other technologies like Zoom. In rural communities, broadband or cell service, may be more limited and use of land lines may be required. Please refer to *New York State Council of Churches' Corona Virus Guide for Pastoral Leaders, Judicatories and Congregations* by [clicking here for](#) pointers on use of technology and/or reach out to your judicatory office for guidance.

Again, let me emphasize the crisis offers to you as pastors and your lay-leadership a good excuse to call each one of members to check in, determine the best way for them to be reached (cell phone, landline, e-mail, and text, along with instruction how to use unfamiliar technology) and to up date your membership records. Don't forget to reach out to the elderly, those in congregant care and prisons along with the families of the infirm and incarcerated who cannot visit loved ones. Also consider parents struggling to maintain jobs while attending to children at home, immigrants (including the undocumented), college students, and others who may not be able to access benefits because of legal restrictions or because they are self employed.

Chaplains in Department of Corrections must continue to go to work but, as of March 21, cannot hold common worship. Please reach out to your chaplains and other colleagues to lend support. Call me if you need to help getting in touch with chaplains. Many prisoners are particularly vulnerable to the virus and may struggle emotionally by not being able to care for and assist their loved ones on the outside.

On March 21, I received a query about whether AA groups should meet given the Executive Order. I clarified with the Governor's Office. These gatherings, per the Governor's Directive on Worship, are not prevented from occurring as long as social distancing is practiced and groups are under 50. Again, however, people's health should be paramount and, if at all possible, groups might want to explore other ways to gather virtually.

One note about homeless shelters and food pantries. If possible, see if food can be distributed outside. While some churches have closed their shelters, this might not be good practice. Homeless shelters need to operate and practice social distancing measures to the degree it is possible. Some shelters, however, are just too small to practice the six feet apart rule. I understand that face masks in this setting may be warranted and shelters can call DHS for facemasks and to arrange to have clients tested. Volunteers will continue to be needed but no one should volunteer with symptoms.

We are aware that, while the virus respects no political party, there is no such thing as an apolitical response to the virus and good public policy advocacy needs to be a feature of pastoral leadership. In this spirit, we continue to update you on public policy and legislative matters during this crisis in our Coronavirus Guide which can inform but not dictate your own pastoral/political/advocacy leadership.

We are very concerned about a proposed nearly 2 billion dollar cut in the state Medicaid budget, even with the Medicaid Federal stimulus which prohibits a cost shift of Medicaid costs to cities and counties, as was proposed by the Governor. We just learned, however, that the Governor is lobbying the New York Congressional delegation to **eliminate** the Federal restriction on cost

shifting to towns and counties which will make his proposed Medicaid cuts far worse. Here is the emergency letter Here is where the Protect Medicaid campaign's House [emergency letter](#) sent by the Protect Medicaid Campaign today. Please contact Senator Schumer, Senator Gillibrand, and your Representative to reinforce.

Consistent with our [2020 Legislative Asks](#), we continue to advocate for taxation on the very wealthiest to help New Yorkers weather this crisis in the short term and to improve our economy in the long term by taking a bottom up economic approach based in more progressive tax policies. The super wealthy continue to do well right now in spite of the drop in stock market or, in many cases, many have discovered money making opportunities during the crisis. The state budget will be debated and approved by no-later than April 1 and ask you continue to advocate with your Assemblyperson and State Senator along with Governor Cuomo, Speaker Heastie, and Senate Leader Stewart-Cousins. Go to [WWW.Makebillionairespay.info](http://WWW.Makebillionairespay.info) for tools to address wealth inequality.

A third Federal stimulus bill is being debated and should get a vote and the President's signature very soon. On March 20, we learned that the recent Federal legislation intended to provide sick leave, unemployment and other benefits along with additional stimulus in a third legislative package. explicitly excluded undocumented people. [Click here to view a letter](#) which was sent to Speaker Pelosi and Minority Leader Schumer on March 20 by a variety of organizations and faith leaders. If you did not sign the letter, you can still adapt it to your purposes and address it to additional people including Senate Majority Leader McConnell, House Minority Leader McCarthy, and your individual Congressperson. We also, again, strongly urge you to reach out to the immigrant residents in your community on whom you rely for many services to hear their story and ask how you can be of assistance including advocacy with your lawmakers.

*Please note that lawmakers are saturated with calls and e-mails. We still recommend phone calls but also tweeting is most effective. You can find their Twitter handles on their websites.* Please view the [New York State Council of Churches' Coronavirus Guide for Pastors, Judiciary Leaders and Congregations](#) updated on March 20. We will release another update by Monday, March 23 if not earlier. Please be in touch with additional questions and comments and I will do my best to address them. Call me at 508-380-8289 or [Pcook@Nyscoc.org](mailto:Pcook@Nyscoc.org).

To offer you a little perspective and guidance I commend to you with this uplifting [interview](#) with a Rabbi, an Imam, and an Episcopal Bishop which was broadcast on NPR which perhaps will lend a little perspective.

Thank you for your leadership in these challenging times.

In faith,

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