



WISCONSIN COUNCIL
OF CHURCHES
COURAGE. JUSTICE. HOLY IMAGINATION.

July 7, 2020

The Honorable Scott Fitzgerald, Senate Majority Leader
The Honorable Robin Vos, Assembly Speaker
Wisconsin State Capitol
Madison, WI 53708

Dear Sirs,

We write to you with grave concerns for the health and well-being of the residents of our state, and appeal to you to take immediate action toward enacting policies that will once again put Wisconsin on a sound footing with respect to controlling the spread of COVID-19.

As a statewide organization with a diverse membership, which has been advocating for safe ministry practices within Christian communities since the early days of the pandemic, the Wisconsin Council of Churches has a unique window on trends and behaviors affecting faith-based organizations – even beyond our own members. Over time, we have watched caution and prudent decision-making informed by medical science and love for neighbor be overridden by politicization, pressure, and problematic behavior around the state.

As a result, Wisconsin is currently classified as a “hotspot state,” with cases increasing at an alarming rate. Since late May, the lack of a coordinated statewide response to COVID has left clergy and churches in an untenable position. Council staff responds to calls, emails, and instant messages throughout the week, asking us about public health conditions, what is considered “safer” practice, when it might be appropriate to open buildings, and whether there is any indication of a forthcoming statewide response. Ministers have needed to become experts in public health, researching medical information which is constantly being revised. Many clergy are under immense pressure to reopen their buildings for public worship. As an organization committed to the unity of the church, we grieve when one church or pastor in a community is pitted against another as each takes a different position on re-opening. Clergy mental health, physical health, and vocational health is a deep concern we all hold in these difficult times. We are charged to care for the well-being of the clergy so they are able to care for the faithful.

We regularly hear of residents of our state being screamed at, mocked, and threatened when they choose to protect themselves, their families and those around them from a dangerous illness by wearing masks in public places and avoiding large gatherings. What we face is not merely a localized problem; an ongoing pandemic requires a more significant response than individual choice, businesses choosing their own policies, or mobilizing local health departments. The states which have successfully “flattened the curve,” reducing hospitalizations and deaths from COVID, have had clear policies in place on the statewide level to monitor conditions, limit spread, test and track cases. We were doing well for a time, but the data has made it clear: we need a stronger solution in place to control COVID-19 than what we have had available to us since late May.

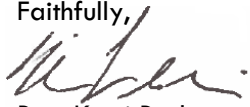
Since the state Supreme Court Decision in *Legislature v. Palm*, it has become clear that your position is that you will not accept strong action to limit this pandemic led by the Executive Branch of state government. If that is the case, then you have a clear moral imperative to act within the Legislative Branch to prevent further illness and death among Wisconsinites.

We implore you to swiftly take actions which:

- Grant the Department of Health Services authority to respond to urgent/emergent public health needs of the COVID-19 crisis without going through the lengthy legislative rulemaking process.
- Allow for statewide data-driven, phased openings and closures of businesses with appropriate guidelines for masking, physical distancing and limited gathering sizes. This should include the possibility of a “Stay at Home” order, should conditions warrant.
- Allow for local requirements to exceed statewide requirements based on local conditions.
- Provide relief for those economically impacted by the ongoing crisis: accept any federal aid for which Wisconsin is eligible; extend eligibility for unemployment, food assistance, and late rent/utility moratoriums.
- Provide economic relief for medical expenses: mandate that insurers waive cost-sharing requirements and prior authorization requirements for COVID-19 treatment; and mandate that a COVID-19 vaccine, when available, be offered at no cost.
- Ensure that all eligible Wisconsin residents are able to register and to vote safely in upcoming elections: simplify voter registration; accept mailed ballots without ID or witness signature; ensure that early voting and ballot drop-offs are readily available; and maximize the availability of polling places that can serve the voting population in each municipality.

This is an urgent matter of the health and well-being of the residents of Wisconsin. We recognize the deep partisan divide in Wisconsin, and yet we also affirm the ability of holy imagination to reach across greater divides than these to heal what is broken. As faith leaders, we regularly work across many differences in order to ensure the common good. In order to emerge successfully from the crisis of COVID-19, we must be called to greater modifications to our daily routines and our personal preferences for the sake of ourselves, our neighbors and our communities. We can make this moral argument within the context of faith communities, but only you as policymakers are in a position to offer the statewide solutions we need. We pray that you will examine your conscience and find a course of action which will allow you to work across political and other differences to meet these critical needs.

Faithfully,



Rev. Kerri Parker
Executive Director
Wisconsin Council of Churches

cosigned:

The Wisconsin Council of Churches Board of Directors, *and*

Rev. Jane B. Anderson, Associate Conference Minister, Wisconsin Conference United Church of Christ

Rev. Jim Arends, Bishop, La Crosse Area Synod - Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Rev. Dr. Christian D. Boyd, Stated Clerk of Milwaukee Presbytery

Rev. Lorraine Cenicerros, Associate Conference Minister, Wisconsin Conference United Church of Christ

Rev. Adam Clausen, Senior Leader, Life Center Madison

Rev. Sue D'Alessio, Director of Connectional Ministries, Wisconsin Conference, The United Methodist Church
Rev. Dr. Teresa Dulyea-Parker, Regional Minister & President, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in IL/WI
Bishop Paul D. Erickson, Greater Milwaukee Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Rev. Katherine Finegan, Bishop of the Northern Great Lakes Synod ELCA
David Groenewold, Lay Member, Greater Milwaukee Synod ELCA
Judy Jaggard, Presbytery Moderator of Milwaukee Presbytery
Rev. Michelle Henrichs, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
The Rev. Dr. D. Jonathan Grieser, Grace Episcopal Church, Madison WI
The Right Reverend Matthew A. Gunter, Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of Fond du Lac
Lisa Hart, Associate Conference Minister for Faith Formation and Justice Ministries, Wisconsin Conference UCC
Fr. Yeprem Kelegian, Diocese of the Armenian Church (Eastern)
The Reverend Joy L. Gallmon, DEd.Min, Pastor of St. Mark AME Church, Milwaukee, WI
Rev. Dr. Hee-Soo Jung, Bishop of The Wisconsin Conference, The United Methodist Church
The Right Reverend William Jay Lambert, III, Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of Eau Claire
Rev. Dr. Rob MacDougall, Associate Conference Minister, Wisconsin Conference United Church of Christ
Jeanne Mantsch, SE Association United Church of Christ, member of First Congregational Church UCC Port Washington
The Very Rev. Archimandrite Christodoulos Margellos, Assumption Greek Orthodox Church, Madison Wisconsin
The Rev. Staci Marrese-Wheeler, Moravian Church, Northern Province
Rev. Gerald L. Mansholt, Bishop, East Central Synod of Wisconsin, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
The Rev. Sarah Moore-Nokes, General Presbyter, Winnebago Presbytery
The Rt. Rev. Steven Andrew Miller, Bishop, The Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee
Pastor Bruce J. Nelson, President of the Western District Executive Board, Moravian Church Northern Province
Rev. Franz Rigert, Conference Minister, Wisconsin Conference, United Church of Christ
Rev. Peter Rogness, Bishop, South-Central Synod of Wisconsin, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
The Rev. Chaz Ruark, Executive Presbyter of John Knox Presbytery, Presbyterian Church (USA)
Rev. Valerie Showalter, Madison Mennonite Church
Rev. Dr. Laurie Skow-Anderson, Bishop of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin ELCA
Rachel Yates, Presbytery Executive of Milwaukee Presbytery

cc: Senator Roger Roth, President, Wisconsin Senate
Senator Janet Bewley, Minority Leader, Wisconsin Senate
Representative Jim Steineke, Majority Leader, Wisconsin Assembly
Representative Gordon Hintz, Minority Leader, Wisconsin Assembly
Governor Tony Evers
Lt. Governor Mandela Barnes
Secretary-Designee Andrea Palm, Department of Health Services