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Gov. Wolf, Religious Leaders Encourage Alternate Forms of Religious Gatherings

Stay-at-home order updated to reflect need to limit in-person religious gatherings

Harrisburg, PA – Amid the COVID-19 pandemic and as significant religious holidays approach in the coming weeks, Governor Tom Wolf and religious leaders from across the commonwealth are encouraging alternative forms of faith gatherings.

Gov. Wolf and Department of Health Sec. Dr. Rachel Levine updated the stay-at-home order guidance to reflect the need for further guidance for religious gatherings.

[Updated guidance](#) notes that while nothing in the stay-at-home order should affect the operation of religious institutions, “Religious leaders are encouraged to find alternatives to in-person gatherings and to avoid endangering their congregants. Individuals should not gather in religious buildings or homes for services or celebrations until the stay-at-home order is lifted.”

“I know that we’re nearing several holidays, including major religious holidays like Easter and Passover,” Gov. Wolf said. “I am encouraging religious leaders hosting a holiday celebration to consider an alternative that does not bring people together in-person.

“As a person of faith, I understand how important it is to worship, and that congregating, whether for a service or seder dinner, can be at the very core of one’s faith. But I also understand how important it is to help neighbors, and the best way to help our neighbors right now is not by congregating. It’s by staying at home.”

Pennsylvania religious leaders joined Wolf in urging fellow leaders to embrace alternate forms of worship.

“Christians the world over are preparing to enter the holiest week of the year,” said Most Rev. Nelson J. Pérez, Archbishop of Philadelphia. “This year, Holy Week comes at a time when the coronavirus has abruptly altered our lives. For the common good, and for

the preservation of each other's health, it is essential for all Pennsylvanians to heed the governor's call not to gather in large groups. We must embrace our common responsibility to one another and slow the spread of this virus. We are blessed with the gifts of technology and social media, which enable us to experience the richness of these Holy Days virtually."

"As we come into this season of renewal and celebration of new life where Christians typically come together in greater numbers than usual, we grieve that the COVID-19 crisis is preventing our ability to do so physically," said Rev. Sandra L. Strauss, Director of Advocacy & Ecumenical Outreach, Pennsylvania Council of Churches. "The most loving thing we can do for our neighbors is to keep them safe, so we continue to encourage our congregations to explore and engage in creative ways of gathering and sharing, such as live streaming, Zoom, and connecting via social media."

"In more than 2000 years the church has faced and survived many adversities, including two world wars, The Spanish Flu and The Great Plague," said Pastor Franky Rodriguez, CDA Community Church, Philadelphia. "The church is not going to go away because we the people of God are the church! In times of trouble the Church gets closer, not further apart. This is not a physical closeness, it's a spiritual one. Although we will not be in the same physical location, we have the technology to share the word of God. This Easter the Church is still united like every other Easter, with thanksgiving, prayer and supplication for the inhabitants of the world. So, let's be responsible and be together, apart."

"This is an excellent time for all of us to remember that the church is not a building, but the people who make up the congregation," said Senior Pastor Mark Kelly Tyler, Ph.D., Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Philadelphia. "We must do everything within our power to save the lives of those we've been called to shepherd. If that means livestreaming the worship services and holding Bible Study in video chat rooms, so be it. I fully support Governor Wolf's effort to keep Pennsylvanians safe and Mother Bethel AME Church is joining in the fight to slow the spread and flatten the curve."

"At our Passover seders this year, there will be many answers to the age-old question, 'Why is this night different from all other nights?'" said Rabbi Jeffrey Astrakhan, Temple Beth Israel in York. "Under no circumstance is gathering at the home of another the right thing to do this year. Stay home. Use online meeting technology and remember, as the Passover Haggadah teaches us, 'Next year, may all be free!'"

"Judaism teaches us the highest value is to save a life, not only our own but how our behavior impacts others' lives, their freedom and their health," said Rabbi Aaron Bisno at Rodef Shalom in Pittsburgh. "It is in everyone's best interests to practice social distancing, so we are finding new ways to gather, support and celebrate one another. We have an obligation, a religious mandate, to recognize the responsibility we have to the wider community. Our preference to be together does not override our responsibility to stay apart until the threat has passed."

“Paradoxically, the most difficult aspect of social distancing for the Jewish community is simultaneously why it's so important,” said Rabbi Daniel Swartz, leader of Temple Hesed in Scranton. “Judaism is practiced communally because we are all responsible to keep each other safe and healthy. Indeed, we're commanded to violate the Sabbath in order to save even a single life. How much more so must we practice social distancing, even in our worship, when doing so protects not only our own life, but lives throughout the community. For me, believing in one God means we're all in this together.”

“During times of bad weather, the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessing be upon him) used to order the muezzin (person who calls to prayer) to change the call from 'come to prayer' to 'pray in your home,’” said Imam Idris Abdul-Zahir, Resident Imam of Masjidullah. “This was because the Prophet was concerned of the harm his followers could encounter traveling to the masjid for prayer under potentially dangerous conditions. During this time, I encourage every religious leader to consider this unseen harm, the Covid-19 virus, in their locale and recommend actions that will keep their congregations out of harm's way. For it is written in the Quran that the saving of one life is as if you've saved all humanity.”

Pennsylvania has more than 10,000 cases and 136 deaths since the first case was announced on March 6. Gov. Wolf has put in place measured, thoughtful mitigation efforts to save lives and stop the spread, include a statewide stay-at-home order.

“I know that Pennsylvanians are strong, resilient and care about their families, friends, neighbors and community, including their religious communities,” Gov. Wolf said. “We must all continue to do our part to stop the spread of this deadly virus.”

You can access Gov. Wolf's remarks about religious gatherings and other recent mitigation efforts [here](#) or on Facebook [here](#).

View the updated stay-at-home order guidance as a PDF [here](#) or on [Scribd](#).