

For Immediate Release
Monday May 18, 2020

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Massachusetts Council of Churches Statement on Massachusetts Reopening Plan

Boston, MA: *On Monday May 18, 2020, the Rev. Laura Everett, Executive Director, and Rev. Jennie Barrett Siegal, President of the [Massachusetts Council of Churches](#) issued the following statement in response to the phased economic reopening plan which included new minimum safety standards for reentry to houses of worship:*

Churches are designed to be places of healing, not sources of sickness. We receive these new minimum safety standards from the state with much concern for those people most at-risk in our churches and our communities.

Many Christians will remain in prayer and praise from home at this time. To those Christians that do decide to return now to their buildings, we advise all to act with extreme caution during this pandemic.

We know that faithful Christians across the Commonwealth ache to return to their sanctuary for worship, and that the gathering of groups of people for worship in other states have been occasions for COVID19 transmission. Just because congregations may return to their buildings does not mean they should. “All things are lawful for me’, but not all things are beneficial.” St. Paul wrote to the divided Church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 6:12).

There is a distinction between the minimum safety standards set by local, state and federal authorities, and the guidance from ecclesial leadership. The Massachusetts Council of Churches connects a wide range of Christian traditions; some denominations have already declared that their churches may not gather in person until July 1, others until the end of the summer, and still others until May 2021 or until a vaccine is found.

The state’s new minimum safety standards for reentry to houses of worship raise many questions and concerns for the clergy and lay leadership across the network of the Massachusetts Council of Churches. In the days ahead, the Massachusetts Council of Churches will issue further guidance for churches to support their discernment of phased re-entry into their buildings.

As we said previously to the Massachusetts Reopening Advisory Board, any just response to the pandemic must prioritize care and resourcing of the communities hardest hit during the pandemic, especially churches in Black, immigrant and unhoused communities that often serve as multi-service centers in addition to spiritual homes. We remain deeply distressed by the lack of comprehensive testing in communities of color, unequal access to care and resources, the financial and logistical burden on churches to provide masks and cleaning supplies, and the decision fatigue of so many church leaders already overwhelmed.

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While much of the response to “reopening” has focused on the economy, we want to remind people of goodwill that the word “economy” comes from the Greek “οικονομία” oikonomía- the whole household of God. To care for the whole household of God means prioritizing not just the care of the fit and healthy, but of the sick and the lonely, the very old and very young. To care for the whole household of God means prioritizing the care of those most impacted. We have yet to see this prioritizing from our national and state leadership. We expect the Church to behave differently.

To support the churches serving communities most impacted by COVID19, the Massachusetts Council of Churches recently launched the [One Church Fund](#).

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The Massachusetts Council of Churches is a statewide network of eighteen Protestant and Orthodox denominations, congregations and individual committed to Christian unity, including: African Methodist Episcopal Zion, New England Conference; African Methodist Episcopal, New England Conference; The American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts; Christian Church (Disciples of Christ); Coptic Orthodox Diocese of New York and New England; Diocese of the Armenian Church in America (Eastern); The Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts ;The Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts; Evangelical Covenant Churches, East Coast Conference; Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, New England Synod; Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Boston; Presbyterian Church (USA), Synod of the Northeast; Religious Society of Friends, New England Yearly Meeting; Salvation Army, Mass. Divisional Headquarters; Swedenborgian Church; Unitarian Universalist Association; United Church of Christ, Southern New England Conference; United Methodist Church, New England Conference