

May 28, 2020

Faithfully Our Hearts Are Open: A Letter of Solidarity from Durham Faith Leaders

As faith leaders we are accustomed to fulfilling our duty by congregating, by gathering for worship in prayer and song. We realize, however, that promoting and facilitating physical proximity, especially through songful worship, poses a potentially lethal threat to the health and safety of our families, friends, and neighbors.

Our responsibility to promote physical distancing during this pandemic is a sacred duty. Our traditions are diverse, yet we share a faithful devotion to the preservation of lives. Our obligation to promote public health during this pandemic is part and parcel of our core beliefs, inextricable with our sense of what God demands of us.

For this reason, we reject the notion that houses of worship ought to be exempt from orders that limit large gatherings. Lest our churches, temples, and mosques become incubators for COVID-19, houses of worship are the very places that must model safety and promote wellness.

In our hearts there is no greater desire than for us to gather in peace. We recognize, however, that at this moment- and likely until a vaccine is available- human behavior in group settings is our greatest asset or liability. We are gravely alarmed by the widespread, reckless move to reopen institutions that put human beings in close proximity to each other. When reopening buildings to large groups, the fast-track is the lethal track. The life-affirming track, which our faiths call us to follow, is one that adheres, at every stage and with utmost prudence, to measures that reduce the risk of transmission and fatality for the vulnerable.

As we pursue our obligation to promote physical distancing, our shared religious values demand that we draw near to each other in other ways. We do not distance ourselves from harsh realities and human dignity, and we are particularly cognizant that COVID-19 is not a “great equalizer.” This pandemic attacks our citizens disproportionately, along fault lines of racial and economic inequality. Closing buildings does not mean closing hearts and hands to the sacred work of caring for our African American, Latinx, and immigrant communities. The hour calls for urgent action. While our stance regarding the timeline for safely regathering may not mirror that of our government officials, we believe that our primary responsibility during this unprecedented pandemic is to the public health and safety of those whom we have been divinely called to serve. We urge all civic leaders to lead with moral fortitude and steadfast devotion to the dignity of those most vulnerable to the health and economic impact of this pandemic.

Lastly, we invite our clergy colleagues whose views differ from our own into conversation with us. We share our convictions with humility, with a listening heart, and with full appreciation for the complexity and uncertainty that challenges all of us in this moment.

In Fellowship and Peace,

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Rev. Scott Anderson
St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Rev. Dr. Jonathan C. Augustine
Senior Pastor, St. Joseph AME Church
National Chaplain, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.

Rev. Donna Banks
Lead Pastor, McMannen United Methodist Church

Rev. Dr. Cornelius E. Battle, Sr.
Senior Pastor, Ebenezer Missionary Baptist Church

Rev. Betty Berghaus, Honorably Retired
Bridge Interim at Mt. Bethel Presbyterian Church

Elder James A. Blake
Pastor, Fisher Memorial United Holy Church

Rev. Spencer Bradford
Executive Director, Durham Congregations In Action

Rev. Allen Brimer
Pastor, Farm Church

Rev. Jill Staton Bullard
Deacon, St. Philip's Episcopal Church

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Lead Minister, Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship*

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Emeritus Rabbi, Judea Reform Congregation*

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*Rev. Ben Krey
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