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CHURCHES URGED TO RETURN TO PHYSICALLY DISTANCED MINISTRY

STATEWIDE - The Wisconsin Council of Churches strongly recommends that churches statewide temporarily return to remote operations as COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations soar due to the highly-transmissible Omicron variant in Wisconsin. While the WCC operates in an advisory capacity and does not have authority to require closures, the ecumenical group's recommendations are weighed heavily by many faith-based organizations. After consulting its medical advisers, the Council recommends that churches not gather in person for the next four to six weeks.

Pastors and lay leaders of Wisconsin congregations recognize the difficulty posed by remote gathering, while stressing the importance of protecting vulnerable members and neighbors. "I know it is frustrating and disappointing that we are having to move in this direction, but the health, safety, and care for our community is of utmost importance," said the Rev. Beth Patton, pastor of Faith Presbyterian Church, Franklin.

The Rev. Dr. Brett Swanson, pastor of Wauwatosa Presbyterian Church, struck a similar note in a message to his congregation: "We cannot be faithful to our common calling as an inclusive and loving congregation that cares about one another body, soul, mind, and spirit if we do not take this step and do so without delay."

If churches are led by love, it is their responsibility to be church in ways that demonstrate love of neighbors, according to Angie Wollschlager, the lay administrator of Lord of Life Lutheran Church in Kenosha. Admitting that the decision to move to online worship was "not ideal," Wollschlager argued that "the temporary sacrifices we can make to mitigate contributing to the continued spread of Covid-19 and its variants during this global spike are worth it."

"We recognize the exhaustion born out of two years of pandemic ministry," said the Rev. Kerri Parker, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Council of Churches. "We long to be together. Gathering remotely is more challenging in many ways. Pastors and technical teams spend countless hours recording and editing for each worship experience, an online room is very different than seeing someone in person, and we know the impact of isolation is real. Still, we ask that churches put a hold on any plans for gathering in physical place for a limited time, until the

Omicron wave has passed. This will protect vulnerable individuals, ease the burden on our healthcare systems, and avoid worsening the pandemic through our actions.”

“Bringing COVID under control requires the care of communities,” continued Rev. Parker. “Community care is a Christian value. We express love of family, friends and neighbors by taking simple, direct action to reduce the spread of illness. Churches have honed their remote ministry skills over the past year and a half, and now we need to lean into those skills again.”

The Council invites churches to shift their ministries to fully remote, or work with a small video streaming team in the church building, until a smaller proportion of the population is sick and less-burdened hospitals allow for people to be treated in a timely manner. Churches wishing to pledge such a shift can do so at bit.ly/omicroncaution or on the Council’s website.

The Council estimates that approximately 80% of mainline Protestant churches in Wisconsin have been offering worship both in-person and remotely this year, with others holding worship outdoors or continuing worship entirely online. 94% of Christian churches the Council surveyed use one or more forms of COVID risk mitigation. Since June 2021, the Council has facilitated 109 clinics at 69 sites, helping to vaccinate over 1400 people. Churches can request to host vaccine clinics or testing sites in their communities by contacting Community Health Program Director Daniel Schultz.

The Wisconsin Council of Churches is a network of Christian churches and faith-based organizations committed to working together across differences. Exercising holy imagination, the organization helps its members and friends make courageous choices that lead toward peace with justice, the vitality of the church, and the well-being of neighbors. The ecumenical organization counts twenty-one Christian traditions representing over 2,000 congregations in its membership, and has been providing information and advice to churches during the COVID-19 public health crisis. Its resources have been shared nationwide. For information on the Council’s COVID work, visit its website at wchurches.org.

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