

A Message to Our Local Faith Leaders

As the cases of COVID-19, and their associated hospitalizations and deaths, increase throughout Georgia and within our own 13-county health district, we want everyone in our communities to take measures to protect themselves and others against this virus that has impacted our nation. To help slow the spread in our state, Governor Brian Kemp issued an executive order, limited businesses, travel and gatherings in Georgia. This order extends not only to certain businesses and restaurants, but also to religious gatherings such as worship services, weddings and funerals. Limitations to these gatherings have also been encouraged by leaders at the state and national level, and all areas of healthcare.

Several community outbreaks across the state, and some within our own district, have been directly linked to close contact during religious events and gatherings. Some places of worship have moved to alternative methods of providing services by using a "drive-in" model. "Drive-in" services still present a risk for close contact. CDC has recently shared information that individuals with COVID-19 may spread the virus up to 48 hours before symptoms appear. A seemingly-healthy person with COVID-19, in an enclosed vehicle with others attending a "drive-in" service exposes everyone in the vehicle. There have also been reports of people not keeping to social distancing guidelines at "drive-in" services; leaving vehicles to meet others and hug, handshake or otherwise closely interact with attendees, putting them at risk.

Public health understands the desire for congregations to gather in worship, especially during this time of the liturgical year, but we strongly encourage every faith-based group to strictly follow guidelines about limiting social gatherings. **As part of Georgia's state-wide shelter in place executive order, effective April 3 through April 13, social gatherings of 10 or more people in a single location where a distance of 6 feet cannot be maintained between individuals are not allowed.**

North Central Health District wants every person, group and organization to take social distancing measures seriously. In Georgia alone, COVID-19 has already hospitalized nearly 2,000 people and ended over 300 lives. It is very active across the state, and we all need to work together and take steps to protect all Georgians. We encourage all faith groups to utilize live-streaming services to hold online worship events in order to maintain recommended social distancing measures and minimize risk of COVID-19 exposure. By following the guidelines set by national, state and local governments, we can fight against the spread of COVID-19 and safely return to our places of worship once the restrictions on gatherings are lifted.