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## **A Statement by the Interfaith Partnership Cabinet urging all houses of worship to use extreme caution in convening holiday worshipers**

*Interfaith leaders urge all houses of worship to be cautious and intentional about gathering congregants in person, and encourage the use of safe, creative ways of connecting for worship while protecting worshipers and their neighbors during the upcoming holiday season.*

The global pandemic and the public health measures being asked of us have disrupted our lives in tremendous ways, including the rituals and practices of religious communities. The COVID-19 crisis has caused millions of deaths worldwide, financial hardship, grief and loss, and has isolated us from the comfort and closeness of family and friends. This time of restriction, isolation, and anxiety is painful, and saddens our hearts.

The number of COVID-19 cases continues to increase in our state and region just as we enter a season filled with a variety of religious holidays and communal gatherings. In this critical period, houses of worship must carefully and intentionally balance religious freedom with government directives and public health guidelines meant to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

Houses of worship are essential to the strength of our region, offering community, emotional and spiritual support, and the opportunity to participate in sacred observances. Gathering is central to many of these functions and observances. Religious and ethical communities are therefore grappling with how best to balance real concerns about public health with a genuine desire to meet the needs of their congregants. We recognize that struggle, and appreciate the sacrifices that many communities are making on behalf of the health and welfare of our region.

The Interfaith Partnership of Greater St. Louis affirms that houses of worship should not be subject to mitigation strategies that are more stringent than those required of similarly situated entities or activities. We also commit to doing all within our power to promote good health practices that contribute to the common good in this time of pandemic.

We call upon all religious leaders and their communities to follow the guidance of public experts and to comply with all local government regulations. We encourage all communities of faith and conscience to intentionally create a plan for inviting people to participate in the rites that are foundational to their faith in the safest manner possible. Where necessary and when risks indicate, religious leaders should be prepared to go beyond local regulations to ensure the safety of their members and of the surrounding community. In some cases, this will mean finding creative ways to adjust longstanding rituals in order to protect the health of participants while still preserving the integrity and sanctity of the practices.

Communities of faith and conscience have responded to the pandemic in amazing and inspiring ways, offering steady connection in a time of social distancing, meeting moral obligations for loving neighbors, and holding hope in face of despair. While our thoughts and practices may differ, we are united in the belief that sharing love for one another means doing whatever we can to protect each other and those that surround us.

*The Interfaith Partnership Cabinet, founded and staffed by the Interfaith Partnership of Greater St. Louis, represents 34 religious communities of faith and conscience within the St. Louis area. It is led by Chair Rev. Dr. David Greenhaw and Vice-Chair Maharat Rori Picker Neiss.*