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Faith-Based Workgroup Recommendations Maryland Strong -- Roadmap to Recovery

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Introduction:

The suggestions herein recognize that the Governor's vision for reopening Maryland's economy and public worship contemplates offering some flexibility to health officers of county and municipal governments -- accounting for regional differences in COVID conditions -- but within the parameters set forth by the Administration for each stage and particular sub-phase.

Progress in each stage will be evaluated against the following criteria, the:

- Governor's four pillars outlined in "Maryland Strong, Roadmap to Recovery (April, 2020) https://governor.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/MD_Strong.pdf
- President's 14-day decline guidelines; and
- implementation of the recommendations in each of the three risk stages outlined in this report: Stage I -- Low Risk; Stage II -- Medium Risk; Stage III -- High Risk.

In each stage, the state will evaluate which localities meet appropriate criteria based upon viral infection rate in the jurisdiction and/or region. In the event a locality has satisfied the criteria, county health officers will be permitted to expand the permitted activities and businesses under the parameters of the current stage identified by the state. The Roadmap also contemplates that county health officers may order local businesses, faith-based institutions, and gathering places to restrict services or close if deemed to be operating in a manner dangerous to the public health, regardless of whether it falls within a category generally opened statewide.

Stage I, Low-Risk Opportunities for Worship

Recommendations

General Guidance:

The workgroup made these recommendations in response to three broad questions applicable to congregations from 25 to greater than 10,000:

1. how to implement effective social distancing and protective measures;
2. how to sanitize thoroughly; and
3. how to conduct low-contact worship programming.

This is the first stage of the recovery, and considers business, community, religious, and quality of life improvements. Once the Governor determines that Maryland has a sufficient foundation using the Building Blocks and other benchmark metrics, the Governor will announce that Maryland is moving to this initial recovery stage. The decisions on what “Low Risk” activities can resume will not be announced in whole as one package, but rather as a phased rollout over a period of time using the White House’s recommended gating protocols.

The goal of Stage I in this report is to reopen the worship activities of Maryland’s faith-based institutions on a low-contact, limited basis. As such, the recommendations of this stage are largely limited to the activities associated with worship itself at facilities that publicly welcome the faithful. Liturgy, principal services, and worship meetings are some of the functions covered here. Current practices outside of the institution’s principal act of worship under Stage I such as funerals, weddings, and baptisms should continue operating under the current protocols until subsequent stages.

The size, location, and make up of Maryland’s religious congregations varies widely and these recommendations must take into account that a one-size-fits-all approach is not possible for the implementation of Stage I. Faith leaders should consider the particular public health measures that are suitable for their respective congregations including vulnerable populations, infrastructure, unique worship needs, and calendrical benchmarks within this stage such as

holidays and major celebrations. Faith leaders may choose to implement additional and stricter rules for public worship than those outlined here that recognize the particular needs and circumstances of their congregations. Faith leaders should also work with their regional brethren in leadership if possible to achieve consensus on recommendations in order to ensure uniform application across multiple jurisdictions, dioceses, conferences, and regions.

Effective communication is essential and leaders should communicate new protocols for public worship emphasizing social distancing both inside and outside of the worship space to their respective congregations beforehand. It will be critical to convey this partnership of responsibility ahead of time and reinforce to every congregant the importance of refraining from engagement if they are not feeling well or if they suspect having been in contact with the virus. Social media, websites, mails, and other forms of communication should manage expectations and firmly outline Stage I rules well in advance of implementation.

While faith institutions should expect to provide face masks if individuals arrive without one, worshippers should be advised to provide their own. Leaders, ministers, and staff involved in services should be expected to wear masks and observe appropriate distances unless speaking. This underscores, however, the important role that state and local governments will play in implementing Stage I, and facilitating the acquisition of personal protective equipment, thermometers, and the materials and products needed to sanitize worship spaces appropriately. This is particularly crucial for large institutional facilities with larger congregations. In most instances, these materials are hard to acquire yet essential to major elements of Stage I implementation.

Leaders should know the rules thoroughly and ensure that staff and volunteers assisting with managing and enforcing the safety measures are well informed. Many of these recommendations depend upon sound human monitoring, strong leadership, and responsible congregations that self-enforce these safety measures. This particularly emphasizes the utmost care and consideration in avoiding exposure to the vulnerable populations, and using great diligence in managing children among the congregation at worship. Leaders should reinforce the protocols to the faithful through appropriate announcements, handouts, signage, and designated markings at every gathering. Every congregation should be scrupulously aware of the careful balance between engaging in worship and protecting public health.

I. Outdoor and Parking Lot Worship -- in addition to and in concert with virtual Internet live streaming services, for some congregations with the appropriate infrastructure, outdoor and parking lot worship has worked effectively, and constitutes an ongoing method of ensuring public health and protecting the most vulnerable populations with the greatest assurance. This may be an option for some institutions moving forward, either as part of other recommendations or as the sole method of worship during Stage I. In such instances, it would be important to establish clear rules such as:

- Using an automobile as the preferred venue for outdoor parking lot worship;

- If outdoor services are not to make use of a vehicle and, instead, rely on seating in an open area, all of the distancing and sanitation protocols outlined below for indoor worship should apply;
- If outdoor services are not to make use of a vehicle, an appropriately sanitized indoor space should be available as an alternate venue in case of sudden bad weather and all of the distancing and sanitation protocols outlined below should apply;
- Ensuring that staff or volunteers can assist with following the rules and provide human monitoring;
- Limiting leaving the vehicle and prohibiting congregating;
- Prohibiting entrance to any building for bathroom use, or if bathroom use is provided as an accommodation, ensuring that there are attendants to re-sanitize contact surfaces after use;
- Distancing vehicles appropriately with at least six feet of space to allow for open windows;
- Using a transmitter, designated radio station, application, social media streaming, or other sufficient audio or amplification device so that the faithful may clearly follow the service from a vehicle;
- Collecting offerings -- if conducted physically at all -- should be through envelopes deposited in a stationary receptacle through the open window of a vehicle with no attendee. They would be collected later in bags and then processed after 48 hours by individuals following appropriate safety protocols;
- For congregations that use public school facilities as worship spaces, now closed, there should be accommodation made for those congregations to utilize the school's parking lot for compliant parking lot in-vehicle worship;
- Leaders, ministers, and staff performing the outdoor service would not have to wear masks provided they maintain appropriate distances.

2. Use of a Primary Building for Public Worship -- the overwhelming majority of workgroup participants cited the urgent need for a return to the primary worship space as a priority for their respective congregations and the importance of providing the faithful with very general timeframes for phasing this in. Stage I anticipates some allowance for this with a focus on worship activities alone, and with the careful and deliberative implementation of the following recommendations:

- Providing virtual live-streamed or recorded services as an alternative for the most vulnerable and discouraging attendance of vulnerable members during Stage I;
- Limiting public worship to the primary worship space in a building and limiting congregational activities to the act of worship alone. Ancillary non-worship activities such as religious education, fellowship, child care, and social activities, should not be part of the Stage I recommendations and should be suspended until separate guidance pertinent to those activities is developed and approved in subsequent stages;
- Adhering to the use of one primary means of ingress and egress, and having attendants open the doors to minimize surface contact. Those arriving and waiting outside should be appropriately distanced with particular attention to small children. If it is absolutely necessary for more than one method of ingress or egress; access for people with

disabilities, parking lot availability, etc., the same rules for human monitoring and sanitation for primary entrances and exits would apply;

- Prohibiting congregating before or after services;
- Prohibiting unusually early entrance to the worship facility for a service and establishing clear timeframes for entry and exit to avoid lingering on site;
- Suspending any provision of food or drink that would normally constitute a component of worship or related activities;
- Utilizing staff and volunteers to enforce protocols and provide human monitoring, direct the faithful to appropriately distanced seating arrangements, and make masks available if needed;
- Strongly recommending non-contact temperature readings of individuals entering the building as a preferred option and requiring, at the very least, individuals to self-assess their temperature before departing their homes. Anyone with an elevated temperature would be required to remain at home;
- Establishing a policy for dismissal if any congregant, once admitted, feels unwell and ought to separate from the congregation during worship activities;
- Providing hand sanitizer stations at the entrance and ensuring their use, particularly upon dismissal (there was discussion that hand sanitizer is a preferable health safety option than gloves);
- Physically marking off seating or closing off rows to help delineate distancing and establishing a clearly discernible 7-foot minimum separation between congregants. Family groups of the same household would not have to observe this distancing, but household groups should be distanced accordingly from other household groups or non-household individuals in the congregation;
- Capping the number of congregants based on achieving the required distancing ratio in the primary worship space, and reducing attendance percentages to accommodate the distancing protocols. Fire marshal occupancy limits in concert with the available physical square footage dictating the required spacing should help inform the number of worshippers allowed for a particular service. If feasible, congregations may increase the number of services to accommodate worshippers incrementally and implement discretionary reservations, ticketing systems, or alternate venues (while not allowing waiting at entrances) to avoid having to turn prospective attendees away once the established limits are met and strictly enforced. Even with meeting these criteria, no service should exceed 250 worshippers in a single building where the primary worship space is located;
- Singing at the congregational level should be suspended during Stage I and choral singing from a designated section of the worship space should be limited to five choir members distanced at least 10 feet apart, wearing masks (**Refer to explanatory note in Part II, Section 2 on group singing below**). The use of recorded or electronic vocal music is strongly encouraged. Live instrumental music should be suspended unless conducted by appropriately distanced soloists. Worship-related dancing should be suspended;
- Using recorded or electronic vocal music is strongly encouraged in lieu of any singing;

- Considering the special worship needs of seniors and vulnerable populations should include making provision for a separate worship opportunity for those who are most at risk with emphasis on utilization of the worship space prior to other members of the congregation;
- Spreading out days of worship if feasible and encouraging the faithful to attend services offered on multiple days of the week in addition to and in lieu of the traditional primary Sabbath or day of worship;
- Sanitizing appropriately. Worshippers would use sanitizer upon departure via sanitizing stations or ushers, and all contact surfaces in the worship space would be sanitized before any subsequent service would occur;
- Dismissing must be orderly and through staff and volunteer assistance, occurring slowly row by row,
- Shortening the normal duration of services to accommodate more services into the day's venue if needed and to take into consideration small children who may not be able to observe distancing protocols for an extended period of time;
- Providing faith-based institutions with lists of state or locally approved cleaning companies that perform the type of deep cleaning that is recommended to kill COVID-19. At the very least, industry recommendations should be widely available that detail the necessary steps for effective institutional cleaning;
- State and local governments should assist with the implementation plan, including but not limited to the procurement of equipment for protection, thermometers, and materials for sanitization. While congregations may bear the cost, there is severely limited availability to enable full implementation of Stage I activities;
- Funerals, weddings, individual baptisms, and services that may constitute worship, but are excluded from primary worship activities are limited to household family members and close relatives implementing all of the distancing, sanitizing, and public health protocols outlined herein, and limited to groups not exceeding 10 including any required witnesses following explicit instructions provided in advance. Leaders and required volunteers and staff would not be included in the 10-person cap;
- Providing families that have held funerals with the option of a memorial service held at a later date when they would be able to invite more people upon the lessening of restrictions;
- Limiting gravesite services to 10 people not including the minister or presider, funeral director, and cemetery staff. Family attendees only would be limited to five at the gravesite. Distancing would be enforced.

3. Non-Stationary Contact Materials -- many components of public worship bring the faithful into contact with each other and materials that should be considered separately from stationary contact surfaces. Worship and fellowship aids such as hand missals, prayer books, and bulletins; objects used for communion and other devotional items with wide exposure to the congregation; and receptacles for the collection of donations warrant special consideration.

- Pastors should advise the faithful that during Stage I, all are expected to refrain voluntarily from communion in any species;

- Institutionally supplied hand missals, prayer books, and hymnals (unless a personal item) should be collected and stored apart from the congregation until further notice;
- Public fonts of any kind should be emptied and completely covered;
- Paper bulletins and handouts of any kind should be suspended until further notice and substituted for electronic versions;
- The practice of the faithful bringing “the gifts” up to the altar for any communion service should be suspended. Similarly, other contact activities such as giving the peace or “passing the peace” should be suspended in lieu of a non-contact gesture such as a wave or bow;
- Items for the normal offering collection such as portable baskets, plates, and boxes should not be used. Faith leaders are encouraged to adopt an acceptable electronic giving method to substitute for this activity during worship and promote electronic giving in their communications to the faithful. Otherwise, a stationary receptacle designated for this purpose should be made available for worship attendees. The regular mail may also be substituted provided that it is handled safely. Staff and volunteers responsible for processing donations should wait for an extended period before handing the material -- 48 hours is suggested -- and use appropriate personal protection equipment while handling.

4. Essential Service Designation -- Stage I implementation should include the designation of faith-based ministries as essential services. This allowance would enable leaders and congregations to conduct a greater array of sacramental and ministerial activities that are related to (but not necessarily part of) public worship, fundamental to the institutional mission, and not necessarily administered at the principal worship building. Ministering to the faithful in crisis, having to travel or make house visits, and engaging in non-worship ministerial activities is severely limited with the current non-essential designation. With responsible and scrupulous adherence to the recommendations protecting public health, as essential businesses have followed, designating faith-based ministries that conduct worship as essential would be key to conducting necessary pastoral visits and related activities in low-risk settings.

Stage II, Medium-Risk Opportunities for Worship

Recommendations

General Guidelines

Recommendations in response to three broad questions to the workgroup applicable to congregations from 25 to greater than 10,000.

1. how to include children and implement related activities;
2. how to include congregational and choral singing, music, and related activities;
3. how to distribute communion and high-contact, group worship activities.

The implementation of Stage II anticipates that all of the protocols outlined in Stage I are underway on being conducted successfully by faith-based institutions. It is a “medium risk” stage where ongoing assessment of COVID-19 cases in individual faith communities is necessary, and scrupulous adherence to established recommendations for distancing, personal protective equipment, limitations on activities and attendance, and observance of public health rules will be critical.

This will likely be a longer stage of the initial recovery, but will also be the stage when a larger number of faith-based activities come back online. As in Stage I, faith-based institutions that reopen during this period will need to comply with strict physical distancing and appropriate masking requirements. The stage would include the numerous steps over many weeks towards recovery reference in the Governor’s Maryland Strong: Roadmap to Recovery.

This stage also contemplates the Governor again allowing some county health officers and local governments that meet appropriate gating criteria, and acting within parameters set by the Administration, to determine if it is appropriate to resume specified commerce and other activities within their jurisdictions. Within this Stage, there will be sub-phases with capacity restrictions, again set by the gating protocols.

Transition to Stage II from Stage I will occur with the governor’s lead once he has assessed that Stage I has been successfully implemented against the same criteria for instituting that stage: 1) the ongoing procurement of sufficient personal protective equipment for frontline healthcare workers; 2) ensuring that hospital surge capacity remains sufficient; 3) having adequate testing capacity moving forward; and, 4) maintaining a robust contact tracing program as the stage advance. Fourteen days of contiguous declining infection numbers is essential to moving from stage to stage. All of the governor’s decision-making will be coordinated closely with state and local officials, and he will continue to make weekly announcements on progress and metrics moving forward.

1. Progression to Certain Broader Worship and Non-Worship Activities -- In addition to activities outlined in Stage I as pertinent to principal worship in the primary worship space, Stage II anticipates a cautious and deliberative expansion of faith-based activities at associated institutions. The following are recommendations for a careful progression to certain broader worship and non-worship activities.

- Observing the same distancing, sanitizing, and health-related activities as outlined in Stage I for worship activities in the principal place of worship, and taking a conservative approach to expanding activities;
- Accommodating multiple points of entry if monitored appropriately;
- Maintaining the 250-person limit in any principal worship space, continuing to observe Stage I protocols, and allowing up to an additional 250 people for other worship and ancillary activities on the physical plant and outside of the principal worship space (See recommendations for youth and religious education below.). For particularly large congregations that may exceed these recommended limits, they would each submit a

proposal such as a percentage-based attendance plan for Stage II for review by the appropriate authorities for its specific application;

- In all circumstances, any concurrent activities should employ the use of sufficiently staggered arrivals and departures to minimize crowding entrances, exits, hallways, and outdoor areas;
- Streaming live and other electronic media should continue to be a preferable option for expanding outreach and worship opportunities;
- Recognizing that parental and household family supervision at worship for small children is generally the safest activity in including the very young, limiting separate activities only to children 12-years old or older, not directly supervised by parents and/or the household family, in adult-supervised groups where distancing is feasible, and not to exceed 25 people;
- Scheduling youth and non-worship activities to days of the week other than the usual principal day of worship;
- Refraining from any expansion of the protocols outlined here in regard to the faith-based institution's child and youth education activities until further guidance in subsequent stages and with additional guidance from the state's Department of Education;
- Suspending childcare unless part of a licensed program until subsequent stages.

2. Congregational and Choral Singing, Chanting, Music, and Dancing -- Recognizing that music, dancing, and singing in particular, are integral components of many worship communities, Stage II anticipates some activities to provide for a gradual return to common practices. These recommendations acknowledge the limited information available on the transmission of COVID-19 through singing especially and dancing to a lesser extent, and warrant subsequent and ongoing consultation by health professionals as these provisions in Stage II are implemented.

While the science on the spread of COVID by singing remains relatively new and continues to develop. Leading experts on the transmission of contagious viral aerosols, namely droplets that are carried by the air, generally agree that singing remains a risky activity even with generous distancing and face masks. There are a variety of conditions that mitigate the indoor airborne spread of the virus such as, quality of mask, ventilation, and type of respiratory activity, but studies indicate that none of the measures outlined in these recommendations *eliminate* the risk of contagion. Furthermore, there is extensive evidence that COVID-19 is also spread by asymptomatic carriers that would not be detected by temperature-taking and significant transmission is enabled even by extremely fine aerosols.

Lastly, laryngologists agree that the expulsion of aerosols from the respiratory system is much greater during the physical act of singing. While face masks help minimize airborne viral particles, they do not eliminate their dispersal. This, combined with transmission through unprotected parts of the body, such as the eyes, and involuntary touching of eyes and mouth from contact surfaces contaminated by airborne droplets, continue to make group and congregational signing a concern in the risk of viral transmission.

- Limiting the number of choral singers to under ten, stationing them in a discreet section apart from the congregation, and distancing them at a minimum of 10 feet apart. Masks should be worn. Soloists using a microphone should sanitize the device after use;
- Using recorded or electronic vocal music is strongly encouraged. Live instrumental music should be suspended unless conducted by appropriately distanced soloists;
- Singing by the congregation would remain suspended;
- Dancing as part of worship would remain suspended;
- Assessing protocols for singing in future stages depending on further guidance from the CDC and the scientific community.

3. Communion and Other Activities -- There are certain sacramental and institutional religious observances that are fundamental to the very essence of faith-based life. Many of these practices are currently on hold or severely curtailed and warrant further consideration in Stage II if the aforementioned benchmarks to advance (Stage II -- General Guidelines) are achieved. The following recommendations would enable a gradual return to conducting some of these activities.

- Allowing for memorial services, funerals, and weddings in strict adherence to the protocols for distancing, sanitizing, and public health used for principal public worship (Stage I); and limiting such functions to 50 attendees or fewer in the precedence of 1) families; 2) relatives; and 3) friends;
- Continuing the suspension of any provision for food or drink that would normally constitute a component of worship or related activities;
- Allowing for religious instruction during the weekday and apart from the principal day of worship according to the same criteria as those outlined above for religious instruction on the principal day of worship;
- Providing for communion with clear instructions to the faithful for discretion and a preference for continued voluntary refrainment. Any reception of communion in Stage II must be explicit about the use of face masks, involve a plan to eliminate contact completely, and ensure distancing. In some traditions where communion is self-administered by the faithful in pre-packaged form, wrappers/containers should not be discarded and kept by the person until proper disposal in a receptacle on site that is handled properly. Under no circumstances should a cup(s) be used by the congregation;
- If communion is administered by a minister or presider, both should sanitize their hands prior to the act. Recipients would stand in line or use a rail, observe six-foot spacing, and approach from that distance only at a given signal. The host or bread would be dropped into the recipient's hand without any touching (both parties resanitize if this occurs) and the recipient would stand aside to a designated space at least six feet away, lower the facemask, and consume before returning directly to his or her seat.
- Baptising would occur for individuals only with suspension of communal baptism, if applicable, until further notice. All attendees would wear masks including the minister or presider. As with the communion instructions above, he or she will sanitize their hands. If a particular tradition uses holy oils, this will be applied without contact using an applicator such as a cotton ball and not the thumb as is customary. All materials would be disposed of properly. The pouring of water would be through an instrument, such as a

shell or bowl, and not by the minister's or presider's hand as customary. The water for the baptism would only be used once for one person, and the font or bowl would be sanitized after each baptism.

Stage III, Restoration of Normal Opportunities for Worship

Recommendations

General Guidelines

Stage III includes more ambitious and long-term goals. There is no realistic timeline yet from any of the scientific experts for achieving this level, as this requires either a widely available and FDA-approved vaccine, or safe and effective therapeutics that can rescue patients with significant disease or prevent serious illness in those most at risk to reach a full return to normal conditions. The Commerce Industry Recovery Advisory Groups will submit "Safe Reopen Plans" for each sector of the economy designated as high risk for COVID spread. The plans will be carefully reviewed and vetted by our Maryland Strong Recovery Team to determine if it meets both public health and commerce needs.

As with the medium risk stage, the high risk stage will also have sub-stages, phases within phases, with capacity restrictions, ongoing assessments, and cautious advances.

While the recommendations in the report represent a synthesis of the overwhelming majority of the workgroup, and every member conveyed how difficult virus-related restrictions have been on their respective congregations, the overwhelming majority cited the pastoral responsibility they have toward their congregations to support recommendations that have the maximum effect on protecting the health of the faithful in their charge. The consensus of the workgroup was to observe a responsible phasing in of the recommendations to ensure public health and to develop stages within stages for full implementation of the phases, particularly for Stage III. All agreed to the following recommendations.

- Continuing the Faith-based workgroup meetings throughout the implementation of the three-staged approach to reopening worship for ongoing guidance and evaluation, and to assess any progress or setbacks;
- Providing designated health professionals to walk through worship facilities and consult on what faith leaders may do to ensure these recommendations are being implemented properly and are working adequately;
- Requesting the Governor to do a video explaining the staged approach, especially as it relates to faith-based institutions, to explain in broad terms some of these recommendations to the faithful. Leaders could show the video to their congregations;
- Ensuring continued state and local support for acquiring and defraying the costs for all of the materials needed to implement these stages such as equipment and sanitizing supplies.