



Governor Phil Murphy
Office of the Governor
PO Box 001
Trenton, NJ 08625

May 13, 2020

Dear Governor Phil Murphy,

Our Churches are thankful for your leadership during this COVID 19 crisis. We have been publicly praying for both yourself as well as all our elected officials during our streaming services and online prayer meetings. You have been given unusually heavy responsibilities at this time and the Bible encourages us to pray for you and all those in authority.

We care deeply for the health and welfare of our congregations and our communities. We recognize the risks and uncertainties surrounding COVID-19, and the extraordinary measures we are all having to take, and we have continued to serve, especially in feeding the hungry and comforting the many who are suffering now.

While we have been praying and serving, we have also been watching. We have seen how liquor stores and abortion clinics have all been deemed “essential,” but churches and other places of worship have not. We are grieved by this but we have been patient and respectful. However, as you move to reopening, we want churches to be considered as ‘essential’ and included in phase 1 of reopening.

First, it is clear that Church and religion are essential under both our state and federal Constitutions. The free exercise of religion and the freedom of assembly are both prominently enshrined in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Encouraging religion and dependence on ‘Almighty God’ is stated as a priority in the preamble to the 1947 New Jersey Constitution: “We, the people of the State of New Jersey, grateful to Almighty God for the civil and religious liberty which He hath so long permitted us to enjoy, and looking to Him for a blessing upon our endeavors to secure and transmit the same unimpaired to succeeding generations, do ordain and establish this Constitution;” and throughout Article 1, Rights and Privileges, stating, “No person shall be deprived of the inestimable privilege of worshipping Almighty God in a manner agreeable to the dictates of his own conscience.”

Secondly, we can work together. Churches most often have a great support system making it easier to meet needs. We are a community. Relationship with God and with others is what we are all about. Especially in times of crisis the Church is essential to the spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being of hundreds of thousands of New Jerseyans.

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Your Executive Orders have forbidden us from physically gathering together to worship God, but the word of God commands us to not forsake the assembling of ourselves together. We have done our best to temporarily adapt to extraordinary circumstances, but this must not continue.

When the phased reopening of New Jersey begins, the reopening of our churches must be in the first phase. It is upsetting that, unlike roughly half the states across our nation, churches in New Jersey were not deemed 'essential' at the outset, but this must come to an end. Reopening places of worship is consistent with the federal guidelines, where in phase one "places of worship can operate under strict physical distancing protocols." Most of our denominational affiliations have published strict guidelines to help us go above and beyond in meeting state guidelines for physical distancing protocols, disinfecting and more. The U.S. Department of Justice said last week, "For many people of faith, exercising religion is essential, especially during a crisis." We are asking you to trust us now to exercise our faith responsibly and compassionately.

We are fully prepared to exercise extraordinary care and precaution to protect the health of our members and our broader communities. Loving our neighbors is part of who we are as the Church. We are more than capable of following the guidelines for social distancing recommended by the Centers for Disease Control, just as other businesses New Jersey has deemed essential. We are able to take the same precautions that their staff and customers have taken.

Please do not underestimate or dismiss the abilities of the Church. Many of us have members who are doctors and nurses. We will listen to their expert advice as well, and they will help us be models of safety.

We ask you to swiftly and publicly recognize churches as essential and ensure that they are included in the first phase of reopening.

Sincerely,



Shawn Hyland
Director of Advocacy

****This letter was signed online by 100 pastors from across New Jersey and has been provided to Governor Murphy.****