Engaging safely with your religious community during the COVID-19 outbreak

Whatcom County
HEALTH
Department

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Faith-based organizations and leaders play an important role in many of our lives. They are sources of connection, comfort and support throughout the year. The places we find connection, strength and comfort are especially important during these uncertain times.

Gathering with others plays an important role in many observances, bringing family, friends and communities together to share the experience. Unfortunately, these are not typical times. Attending in-person gatherings of any kind increases your risk of getting COVID-19 and spreading it to others. Please carefully consider your choice to attend in-person worship services. Safe Start Washington allows outdoor religious services up to 100 people in Phase 1. Phase 2 allows indoor worship of up to 50 people or 25% of the building capacity, whichever is less. Phase 2 also allows for in-home services of up to five people. Face masks must be worn and a six-foot distance must be maintained between members of different households. Employees, members, and visitors should screen for symptoms prior to attending services. These precautions will reduce the risk of infection, but it is still possible to spread the illness to others. We know it's difficult to stay home, but it's the best way to protect those we love.

Religious communities are finding new and creative ways to celebrate faith and maintain fellowship while still honoring Stay Home, Stay Healthy guidelines. Drive-in spiritual services are permitted in Phase 1, provided each vehicle is occupied by members of the same household. Many religious services are being broadcast online. Some congregations are organizing phone trees to check in with, and offer help to vulnerable members of their community. Community service plays a part in many religions. Volunteer work which adheres to Stay Home, Stay Healthy could be a faith-based action to help others in our communities.

Here are some ways to celebrate your faith and build fellowship while maintaining physical/social distancing:
- **Attend a drive-in spiritual service.** More information about drive-in spiritual services is available in this [fact sheet] and this [memo from the Governor].
- **Join a service being broadcast online.** Ask a faith leader in your community about how to participate. This could be an opportunity to worship with loved ones afar; consider joining an online service with family or friends in another community, or inviting them to join yours.
- **Many organizations are using a phone tree to maintain contact with their members**.
- **Find out how your faith-based group is serving the community.** Many faith-based organizations have modified their volunteer opportunities to fit new guidelines. Volunteering can have positive benefits for the volunteer as well as for the person or community served. Ask if your religious organization has volunteer opportunities or visit [Whatcom Unified Command's volunteer page] for more options.
- **Plan to share a special meal, readings, songs, or other traditions in your household.** If you typically would invite others, use a livestream option to "gather" together.
- **It's ok to choose quiet and contemplation too.** Many of us feel exhausted and stressed right now. It's enough to fill your own heart first. Prayer, meditation, or mindfulness can reduce stress and improve mental health.

Participating in religious events often provides people with a sense of comfort and peace. And that can be especially important during this stressful time. Staying home may change the way you typically observe, celebrate, and participate in religious events, but it doesn't take it away. In addition to finding new and creative ways to celebrate and participate in religious services, it's important to remember that staying home is an act of love and service.

We have developed a resource for religious leaders looking to find alternative ways to support their congregations. It can be found [here].