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COVID-19 Proclamations Advice to the faith communities of Haywood County

From: Frank G. Queen, Haywood County Attorney
Date: 17 April 2020

The Haywood County Health Department, the Emergency Management Services Office and the leaders of county government have asked me to give advice to the faith communities concerning gatherings during the current state of emergency.

All of us recognize the vital importance of our churches and faith communities in supporting us when we are facing the difficulties of our lives. The novel coronavirus is an invisible, real, and frightening part of our world now. We need the support of those who know and love us more than ever.

Gathering at worship services, though, presents an opportunity for the virus to spread, unseen and dangerous, between us. How can we preserve our faith communities if gathering risks our health?

First, we can acknowledge that we have a choice. We can ignore the threat, we can gather without protection, and we can risk our own lives and the lives of our community members when we do.

Our other choice is to gather with protection and in new ways and defeat the virus's spread.

It is my advice, and the advice of our health department, that

- where family members are in separate vehicles, and

- where there is no physical contact between people in the different vehicles (that is, no touching, hugging, hand-shaking, no children running outside from vehicle to vehicle and the like), and
- where the vehicles are parked so that a six-foot physical distance is maintained between open windows, and
- where there is no physical contact between those conducting the service and those attending the service (for example, no passing of a collection plate, or administering communion),

then the church service is consistent with the guidance from the Governor's emergency proclamations and the emergency proclamations of Haywood County and the municipalities.

The proclamations require maintaining physical distancing of six feet and prohibit gatherings of more than 10 people. But it is my advice that when the congregation is divided into family units by their cars, and there is no physical contact between those in different vehicles, then the objective of social distancing is achieved and the "gathering" is smaller than 10 people.

This interpretation and advice does not authorize gathering non-family members into vehicles such as church vans, because within a vehicle the required social distance of six feet cannot be maintained.