



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR  
CITY OF CHICAGO

LORI E. LIGHTFOOT  
MAYOR

May 14, 2020

Dear Members of the Chicago Faith Community:

I write at a moment where there is frustration and concern about the continued limitations on the number of people who can be convened for worship and other important services. I have heard from and consulted with many of you and I very much appreciate your counsel and your candid comments.

As a person of faith, my constant prayer is for strength and wisdom. Having grown up in a church, I am very much aware of how the full embrace of a church community nourishes one's soul. The "when" question about the reopening of church is a daily conversation I have with my 91-year-old mother, herself a devout woman of faith who sorely misses seeing members of her church family and feels the pangs of loneliness and isolation that physical distance can bring. What I tell her in these conversations, and what I say to you now is that these limitations on our mobility are necessary to save lives. And so, just as I have counseled my own beloved mother, I now urge you, stay the course, continue your ministry, but do it consistent with the social distancing guidelines that have made an enormous difference and saved our city from overwhelming our healthcare system, burying even more people, and devastating more families.

There are certain things that remain true in this moment: People are still getting sick and people are still dying because of COVID-19. Today, 503 people are hospitalized in intensive care units, fighting for their lives because of COVID-19. People come and people go from the hospitals, but that daily ICU count means that COVID-19 remains a life-threatening menace in our city.

Every day, we all face painful reminders of the devastation that this disease has brought to our lives. The painful, tear-soaked testimonials of health care workers who have seen their hospitals swell with the sick and dying are seared into my memory forever. The calls that I have made to the survivors of the dead – the widows, the children, the friends – those devastating moments are not ones that I can easily compartmentalize and move on from. Yes, we have made progress, but be clear that victory is not in our grasp, and it will prove illusory if we do not stay the course now.

Some have argued that these rules of mere civil authorities should not apply to the faith community. Or that the imposition of these mobility restrictions impinges on religious freedom. My friends, the necessity of limiting the size of gatherings and limits on mobility are not about religious freedom or the more legalistic "free exercise of religion." There is nothing about the Stay at Home order that has prevented all faith traditions to gather virtually for services, rituals

and activities that are meaningful for your community. Those of you who are of the Christian faith know that the gospel of Matthew teaches that “where two or more are gathered in my name, there will I be also.”

This moment is very much about the cold reality of the facts of how this virus is transmitted, and how it ruthlessly attacks. There is no denying that to date, more than 33,000 Chicagoans have contracted this virus, and 1,500 poor souls have died as a result. And while these numbers are flattening, there has yet to be any decrease.

The virus is particularly unforgiving in Black and Brown communities in Chicago. While here too we have made progress, Black Chicagoans, particularly those with underlying conditions, are still dying at a disproportionate rate. And the outlook for the Latinx community remains challenging with now over 40% of the confirmed cases and climbing.

When you look across your congregations, do you see the elderly, or people with underlying medical conditions like asthma, diabetes, heart disease or upper respiratory ailments – the kinds of underlying conditions that make each individual, old or young, significantly more vulnerable to COVID-19? Of the more than 1,500 people who have died from this terrible virus, over 90 percent had one or more underlying medical conditions that made treatment more complex and surviving ultimately futile. When the doors of the churches, synagogues, mosques and other places of worship begin re-opening, those vulnerable populations will still need to take extra care and stay home. And any plan for reopening must take into account both the vulnerable populations, who must stay home, as well as detailed plans for those congregants who do gather in compliance with the law so as to not put themselves or others they come into contact with at risk, particularly those in their homes.

We are all being challenged as leaders in ways that we could never have imagined in this fight of a lifetime. Like many of you, I have spent every waking hour of every day working as hard as I have ever worked in life to be a leader worthy of this moment. I know that lives truly depend on the choices I make every day. I try to humble myself, put distractions aside, be an instrument for good and I try to live my values every day.

And what is asked of you in this moment? I know that as faith leaders you take the health and well-being of your community with the utmost seriousness and further that you put the health and well-being of your congregants first. I urge you to continue speaking to the pain, and fear that ripples through our city in waves. Lifting up the broken and the downtrodden and help them find peace and salvation. In sum, to do all the things you have been doing for years that are needed now more than ever, but to do it from an appropriate distance because we know with certainty this virus ravages us when we gather in groups.

Yes, limiting services and other important religious convenings like funerals, baptisms, bat and bar mitzvahs, breaking fasts, and weddings is hard. Very hard. But it remains every bit as important now as ever.

I am urging you to stay the course. If there is a problem, I would rather be in conversation than in conflict. But to be clear, I am resolute that I must enforce the rules of the governor’s stay at home

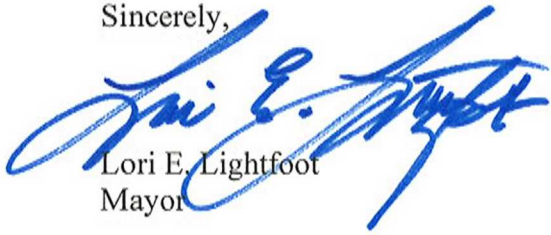
order. To be fair to all, I simply cannot look away from non-compliance no matter the source or the intention.

Let's stay together in this time, for the good of all we hold dear.

I invite you to join with me in a conversation about how communities of faith can start to look to the future and what a gradual reopening will look like for protections of faith workers and congregants.

While we may be apart, we are together in believing.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Lori E. Lightfoot". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "L" and "E".

Lori E. Lightfoot  
Mayor