Guidelines for the Conduct of Faith-Based Services Including Weddings and Funerals Held in Houses of Worship

This document is a supplement to the "Frequently Asked Questions for Faith-Based Communities" document issued by the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services on April 2, 2020.

The reopening of faith-based services held in houses of worship during the continuing threat of the coronavirus should not be interpreted as a diminution of the threat of the virus. Failure to adhere to appropriate safeguards during the conduct of such services could result in the continued spread of the virus.

Leaders of faith communities should lead and demonstrate by word and action the continuing necessity of appropriate social distancing and other precautions including maintaining six feet of distance between parties, as defined below.

Faith leaders are responsible for the safety of those who attend services in houses of worship and must limit physical participation on the premises depending on the size and structure of the house of worship. This document anticipates flexibility in the timing of reopening of services at houses of worship throughout the State based on the judgment of the faith leaders responsible for making such decisions.

The guidelines are as follows:

- Encourage those who are sick or at risk to stay home. This includes:
  - The elderly
  - People with underlying medical conditions
  - Family members who live with elderly people or those who are at risk
  - People who have access to those at risk in nursing institutions
  - People who have upper respiratory or flu-like symptoms
  - People who live with someone with upper respiratory or flu-like symptoms
  - People with COVID-19 or live with someone with COVID-19
  - People who have been exposed to someone with COVID-19

- Seating in houses of worship should be arranged in such a way as to maintain appropriate social distancing between parties. A "party" should be understood to include members of a household who live together and therefore may be seated together in the house of worship, but should maintain six feet of social distance from other parties.

- Seating, doors, restrooms, common areas, etc. should be sanitized between services.

- Faith communities are encouraged to continue the use of video and other streaming technologies to allow members of their communities to remain connected to the larger community without being physically present.

- Faith communities are encouraged to add additional service times to allow for appropriate social distancing. Where appropriate, the use of overflow rooms and the continuation of drive-in services can be effective in maintaining proper social distancing.

- The passing of a common collection basket or any other item between parties is contrary to good health practices at this time as it would contribute to the spread of the virus and is therefore not permitted. The use of a central collection basket or multiple baskets depending on the size of the house of worship and size of group present is allowed.

- The use of sacred books, hymnals, missals, etc. that remain in the house of worship for the general use by those present is not permitted as such materials can facilitate the spread of the virus. Those attending may bring their own sacred books to the service and take them home after the service. Alternatively, the house of worship could provide clean copies of such books for the exclusive use of individuals or parties which would be taken home by the parties after each service.

- The conduct of scheduled faith services is contemplated by this guidance document but fellowship, social gatherings, or other functions before or after the services on the premises of the house of worship are not permitted as such gatherings could expose those present to the virus.

- Children present at services should remain with their parents or guardians and refrain from congregating or interacting with children of other parties on the premises. For example, nursery services are not permitted.

- It is essential for the safety of those attending services that their arrival and departure be managed in such a way as to prevent interaction between parties. Appropriate steps should be taken to dismiss and pace the departure of those present at the conclusion of the service so as to prevent the interaction between parties as distances less than six feet.

- The use of staff or volunteers to hold open doors to the house of worship so that those attending are not touching common door handles is highly encouraged.

- Religious services that include a distribution of communion are highly encouraged to adhere to additional precautions including:
  - Faith traditions that allow for the use of pre-packaged communion elements are encouraged to do so.
  - The use of a common communion cup shared between parties is not permitted as it would obviously contribute to the spread of the virus.
  - Sound medical judgment would require that any person involved in the distribution of communion first thoroughly wash and sanitize his/her hands.
  - Prudent implementation of social distancing would highly suggest that persons receiving communion from a faith leader should do so in single file lines (not side by side) with six feet of distancing between persons. Releasing one row at a time for communion will prevent long lines from forming that would compromise social distancing.

- Funeral services held in funeral homes are permissible so long as such services comply with the above guidelines. Receiving lines are not permitted. Receptions, meal functions, or other gatherings before or after the service are subject to the ten person rule.

- Wedding services held in venues other than in houses of worship are permissible so long as such services comply with the above guidelines. Receiving lines are not permitted. Receptions, meal functions, or other gatherings before or after the service are subject to the ten-person rule.