

## THE CRISIS IS ABOUT PUBLIC HEALTH, NOT RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

As Maine faith leaders, we encourage people of faith and good will, especially during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, to follow sound public health guidelines that help us live our healthiest lives while also protecting other community members.

In calling for “love without borders,” [Pope Francis states what we also believe](#): “A virus that does not recognize barriers, borders, or cultural or political distinctions must be faced with a love without barriers, borders, or distinctions”. This admonition rings even more true when we realize how COVID is disproportionately harming communities of color, low-income families, those who are homeless, and people living with pre-existing conditions who lack adequate health care.

Each of our traditions seeks to promote the common good. Our forebears in faith started hospitals, developed countless programs to comfort the afflicted, and called for socially responsible, scientifically sound practices for reducing poverty, curing illness, and educating the community.

The partnership between religion and science is nothing new. Recently the seven Protestant Christian denominations that are members of the Maine Council of Churches worked closely with the Maine CDC (Center for Disease Control and Prevention) to develop "[At the Threshold](#)," a guide on best practices regarding COVID-19 and in-person worship.

In these times, the ancient truth remains compelling: securing my own health and well-being is utterly tied up with, and dependent on, my helping to secure your health and well-being. Promoting health – *salus* in Latin, from which the word salvation derives -- is sacred work.

National evangelical leader [Jim Wallis notes that faith leaders have three roles](#): “to put our moral authority behind the doctors and scientists to maintain the discipline of physical distancing, to show how physical distancing must not lead to social isolation, and to focus on the most vulnerable.” We agree with Rev. Wallis that “we will not pack our churches in some foolish way, infecting our neighbors and neighborhoods with this disease”. We also share his conviction that the current crisis is not about curtailing religious liberty; it’s about promoting public health. Our spiritual obligation, as Judaism affirms, is to “choose life.”

Our religious traditions also teach that the way of holiness is through acts of love, compassion, and justice. We strongly support individual and collective efforts to protect members of the community from infectious disease, especially students and teachers along with the elderly, the incarcerated, and others in congregant living settings. We’re enormously grateful for health care workers and others who diligently care for the sick and tend to the bereaved. We lift up prayers of support and encouragement for frontline workers who keep our grocery stores open, our mail delivered, our garbage picked up, and our children educated, whether in person or online. We’re grateful for the scientists, researchers, and experts who are continuously trying to expand our knowledge and strengthen our capacity to bring healing and reduce suffering. So, too, we benefit greatly from the skilled leadership of our public leaders who seek to implement wise and fair

public policy, including Governor Janet Mills as well as Dr. Nirav Shah and his staff at the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention. We're indebted to them all.

We are grateful that religious freedom is a fundamental right, protected by the U.S. Constitution. At the same time, our traditions lift up a more expansive, more demanding notion of freedom than the liberty to do as one wishes, regardless. True freedom is the freedom to be *with and for* one another, to care for others as oneself, and to act lovingly, justly, compassionately toward all. Spiritually sound, morally principled freedom is the freedom to be responsible and serve humbly rather than claim special privileges or exemptions for oneself or one's closed community.

By wearing masks, washing our hands, maintaining social distance, and observing public health guidelines at worship as well as in all daily interactions, we're not being especially virtuous or somehow sacrificial. Rather, we're being responsibly human. Our faith traditions ask nothing more – and nothing less – of us.

Signed by concerned Maine faith leaders,

Rt. Rev. Thomas J. Brown, Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of Maine  
Rev. Marvin M. Ellison, Presbyterian Church (USA)  
Rev. Jane Field, Executive Director, Maine Council of Churches  
Reza Jalali, Muslim scholar  
Rev. Tamara L. Torres McGovern, United Church of Christ  
Rev. Augustine Nellary, Roman Catholic  
Rabbi Jared Saks, Reform Judaism

We welcome other faith leaders in Maine to add their signature to this statement. A digital file of our statement and a sign-on link can be found at [MaineTogetherInFaith.com](https://MaineTogetherInFaith.com).