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## **Gov. Wolf and Religious Leaders Ask Pennsylvanians to Help Keep Each Other Safe During Holidays**

**Harrisburg, PA** – Today, Governor Tom Wolf and religious leaders from across the commonwealth asked Pennsylvanians to take COVID-19 precautions and help one another stay safe during the upcoming holiday season.

“After a difficult year like this one, I know that we all want to take comfort in our family and religious traditions during the holidays,” Gov. Wolf said. “But the truth is that COVID-19 is still as dangerous as ever right now, and the best thing we can do to protect our loved ones is to worship and celebrate at home this year.

“With the announcement of several vaccines undergoing FDA review, we can see some light at the end of the tunnel. But we aren’t there yet, and we need Pennsylvanians to help each other stay safe until an approved vaccine is widely available. The choices each and every one of us make help to protect our religious communities, our families and our friends.”

Gov. Wolf released a video message encouraging religious leaders and worshippers to keep one another safe from COVID-19 over the holidays.

Pennsylvania religious leaders joined the governor in urging fellow leaders to help their congregations stay safe and embrace alternate forms of worship.

“Christians around the world are preparing for the birth of the Lord Jesus in Bethlehem,” said Philadelphia Archbishop Nelson J. Pérez. “This year, perhaps more than ever, we need Christmas and its promise of hope for a suffering humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. Though our Christmas experience will be far from typical this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential that we do our part to preserve each other’s health and to slow the spread of the virus. We are blessed to be able to celebrate the richness of the Christmas season safely in-person and virtually using the gifts of technology.”

"During the Christmas season, we must do everything we can to protect the lives of those we've been called to shepherd," said Reverend Robert Johnson, Pastor of Tindley Temple United Methodist Church. "If that means streaming services and celebrating the holidays with family on Facetime, so be it. Our congregation has seen how real COVID-19 is, and why we must take it seriously. I support Governor Wolf's effort to keep Pennsylvanians safe and urge everyone to celebrate the holidays safely and responsibly - wear masks, stay at home if you can and keep physical distance."

"As we begin our journey toward Christmas, it's time to remember that love came down at Christmas," said the Rev. Mitch Hescox of The Evangelical Environmental Network. "The best way to reflect the love of Jesus in this season is to love God with our entire being and love our neighbor. Loving God and loving our neighbor means keeping everyone safe. As places of worship remain one of the leading COVID-19 transmission hubs and with Pennsylvania facing a 57% increase of COVID-19 hospitalizations, it's time to suspend in-person worship.

"Our frontline health care professionals are overwhelmed, and the medical system is in danger of cracking. It's time for God's people to be a small example of Christ's sacrifice by sacrificing in-person worship. Suspending in-person worship isn't easy as we all face new mental health challenges during these uncertain times. Being in the beloved community helps allay fear, anxiety and stress, but let's find new ways to build community as we strive to love God and our neighbor by putting lives first. Suspending worship for now is the loving thing to do."

"Most people know that, during Hanukkah, we celebrate the dedication of the Maccabees, who were willing to risk their lives to protect their faith," said Rabbi Daniel Swartz, spiritual leader of Temple Hesed of Scranton. "What many don't know, however, was that these same Maccabees also considered it their sacred duty to change certain traditions in order to save lives. Most people know the story of the miracle of the olive oil that lasted for 8 days. But many don't think about the miracle of the first day, before the oil lasted for 7 days more than expected. The first day 'miracle' was that the Maccabees had enough faith in a brighter future that, even though the situation was very dark, they did what was needed to bring light. So be a modern Maccabee — stay home and connect electronically, so you can save lives and bring light toward a better future."

"For Christians, Advent is a time of waiting and anticipating of new life—the birth of the Christ child," said Rev. Sandra L. Strauss, Director of Advocacy & Ecumenical Outreach, Pennsylvania Council of Churches. "We celebrate each and every life, and we encourage our neighbors and congregations to protect life by celebrating the season responsibly. Gather virtually for worship. Reach out to neighbors by phone, Zoom or in writing to tell them you care. Take appropriate precautions when it is absolutely necessary to be out. Remember that wearing masks and physically distancing are the greatest gifts of love we can give this season."

"'What Would Jesus Do?' is a question many Christians ask themselves," said Rev. Linda Noonan, Senior pastor at Chestnut Hill United Church in Philadelphia. "In a time of pandemic, I have to believe his answer would be, 'Worship online and love others from a safe distance.'"

This is not only the right thing to do in a pandemic, it is a deeply spiritual act, and a profound way to honor Christmas. As clergy, our greatest gift to those we seek to protect, love and serve is to protect them by loving and serving them online.”

“As we enter the holiday season for our many Christian and Jewish family and friends, the time of year for large religious celebrations and family gatherings, I encourage all Pennsylvanians to advance the fight against the spread of COVID-19 by continuing to wear a mask in public and limit travel for necessities only,” said Imam Idris Abdul-Zahir, Resident Imam at Masjidullah: The Center for Human Excellence. “With a ‘safer at home’ approach, we’ll be able to slow the spread of this deadly virus and look forward to times when it’s safe for us to celebrate together again. The holidays are a time to cherish what is sacred. Celebrating at home this year will protect and save one of our most sacred gifts; the gift of life.”

”For the faithful, we know that our faith sustains us during difficult times,” said Gov. Wolf. “And I have faith that together, Pennsylvanians can do anything we set our minds to. Let’s all work together this holiday season to take care of our neighbors and serve our communities by keeping one another safe. By uniting to stop the spread of COVID-19, we can honor the meaning behind this holiday season and usher in brighter days sooner.”

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