

May 4, 2020

The Honorable Ralph S. Northam  
Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia  
P.O. Box 1475  
Richmond, VA 23218

Re: Modification of Executive Orders to exempt weekly religious gatherings

Dear Governor Northam:

As pastors of churches in Virginia, we thank you for your labors these last several months to care for the people of the Commonwealth. We have been praying for you. We write now to urge you to modify Executive Orders 53 and 55 to allow – at minimum – once-weekly gatherings of religious organizations, provided that reasonable public-health precautions are taken.

COVID-19 has taken a grave toll on the health of the Commonwealth. Many of our fellow Virginians have suffered the physical effects of the coronavirus, and many more have experienced fear, hopelessness, loneliness, and despair during this dark time. This spiritual suffering is among the very real harms from the pandemic.

The Church of the Lord Jesus Christ is a hospital for the spiritually sick. Yet corporate worship services of more than 10 people have been banned in Virginia since March 23, regardless of the public-health protocols in place and notwithstanding that groups are permitted to gather in settings such as non-retail offices and “essential” retail businesses. Prohibiting corporate worship services has exacerbated the sense of sorrow, isolation, and fear felt by so many citizens across the Commonwealth.

Corporate worship is commanded by Scripture and has been a foundational element of Christian life for nearly 2,000 years. Alternatives such as live-streamed services and “drive-through” worship are not adequate substitutes to the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-27) united together in corporate worship. God, through Holy Scripture, commands believers in the Lord Jesus to assemble. In Hebrews 10:24-25, the writer to the Hebrews exhorts Christians not to neglect meeting together, but instead to stir up one another to love and good deeds and to encourage one another. In 1 Timothy 4:13, the Apostle Paul exhorts Timothy, a pastor in the city of Ephesus, to devote himself to the public reading of Scripture. People must be present for the reading to be public. Ephesians 5:19 tells Christians to address one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Indeed, physical presence is vital for *all* aspects of corporate worship – prayer (1 Timothy 2:1), teaching (Colossians 3:16), preaching (2 Timothy 4:2 and Galatians 1:23), baptism (Matthew 28:18-20), and the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:27-34). The early church assembled weekly each Sunday, the day of the resurrection of Christ, to worship (Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:1-2). Scripture is clear: God’s Word calls for the regular, physical assembly of God’s people.

These gatherings are one of the means God uses to heal and restore our souls – they are part of God’s treatment plan for the spiritually sick. The longer the government bars Christians from meeting, the more damage is done to the spiritual well-being of Virginians in need of spiritual care during this difficult time.

Because corporate worship is central to Christian life, it is extraordinary for churches to forego meeting for even a single Sunday. Thus, with each passing week that corporate worship is banned, as churches stand ready to implement reasonable public-health precautions, the government pushes Christians closer to the point where they must choose to sin against God and conscience or violate the law. Ultimately, as Christians, we are compelled to obey God’s law (Acts 5:29); as the great Virginian James Madison explained, “It is the duty of every man to render to the Creator such homage and such only as he believes to be acceptable to him. This duty is precedent, both in order of time and in degree of obligation, to the claims of Civil Society.” The Commonwealth has long recognized that it should not force citizens to choose between their conscience and obeying the law unless there is truly no possible alternative. This is the principle embodied in the Commonwealth’s Constitution, which provides that “all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience” (Article 1, Section 16), as well as Virginia’s Act for Religious Freedom (Va. Code Sec. 57-2.02). The ban on corporate worship prevents Christians who believe that Holy Scripture commands them to assemble for worship (Hebrews 10:24-25) from acting as their consciences – and God Himself – dictates.

We fully recognize that you have limited gatherings with the goal of reducing the spread of COVID-19. As pastors, we share that desire and are committed to protecting the physical well-being of all who attend church services. During the COVID-19 pandemic, protocols such as those recommended by the CDC – including disinfecting hard surfaces, abstaining from physical contact, providing sanitizer, keeping six feet of distance, encouraging the sick and vulnerable to stay home, and closing our nurseries and Sunday School classes – would fulfill the Executive Orders’ goal of protecting public health while also permitting us to satisfy our religious obligations and serve the spiritual needs of our communities.

The Executive Orders are rightly intended to prevent avoidable deaths. Yet the sobering truth is that, unless the Lord Jesus returns, each of us that survives the pandemic will still die. There is no escaping death, for death is the wages of sin (Romans 6:23), and we have all sinned (Romans 3:23). But there is good news: The Lord Jesus came to save all who repent and believe through his life, death, and resurrection, and he will come again to make all things new. This gospel message means hope for sinners and the downcast. It is the good news that the spiritually sick in Virginia need to hear in these dark days, and which churches long to celebrate corporately.

For these reasons, we respectfully implore you to modify Executive Orders 53 and 55 to permit – at minimum – once-weekly gatherings by religious organizations, provided reasonable public-health precautions are taken. We stand ready to serve the people of Virginia as ministers of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Warmly in Christ,\*



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James Acree, Lead Pastor  
Bacon's Castle Baptist Church  
Surry

James Ayers, Sr. Pastor  
Oakland Baptist Church  
Richardsville

Kenji Adachi, Lead Pastor  
All Peoples Community Church  
Fairfax

Wesley Belcher, Senior Pastor  
Daleville Baptist Church  
Daleville

Derrick Adams, Sr. Pastor  
Amelia Baptist Church  
Amelia

Dennis Bledsoe, Pastor  
Flat Ridge Baptist  
Cana

Jay Albritton, Lead Pastor  
LifePoint Christian Fellowship  
Chesapeake

Kenneth Bledsoe, Pastor  
Hunting Creek Baptist Church  
Big Island

Dr. Timothy Amador, PhD, DDiv, Pastor  
Iglesia Bautista Misionera  
Chesterfield

Jim Booth, Pastor  
Staples Mill Road Baptist Church  
Glen Allen

Joey Anthony, Lead Pastor  
Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church  
Colonial Heights

Dr. Hopson Boutot, Lead Pastor  
Poquoson Baptist Church  
Poquoson

Ken Arnold, Senior Pastor  
Lifeline Fellowship Church  
Chesterfield

Joel Bradberry, Pastor  
Harvest Christian Fellowship  
Mechanicsville

Isaac Arthur, Sr Pastor  
Revival Baptist Ministries International  
Alexandria

Philip Bramblet, Pastor  
Furnace Creek Baptist Church  
Rocky Mount

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\* Church names noted for identification purposes only.

Ryan Brice, Lead Pastor  
Nansemond River Baptist Church  
Suffolk

Maxie Ray Brock, Pastor  
Oakton Baptist Church  
Chantilly

Dr. Danny Campbell, Senior Pastor  
The Tabernacle  
Danville

Steven Carne, Senior Pastor  
Hamilton Baptist Church  
Hamilton

Mike Cauthorne, Pastor  
Resonate Church  
Midlothian

Nathan Cecil, Senior Pastor  
Fox Hill Road Baptist Church  
Hampton

Hoyoal Chang, Sr. Pastor  
Riverview Korean Baptist Church  
Woodbridge

Matthew Childress, Lead Pastor  
Brentwood Baptist Church  
Norfolk

Timothy B. Chrisman, Pastor  
Little River Baptist Church  
Bumpass

William Colvin, Senior Pastor  
Great Neck Baptist Church  
Virginia Beach

Ron Comoglio, Pastor of Music  
Occoquan Bible Church  
Woodbridge

Dr. John Corson, Pastor  
Windsor Baptist Church  
Windsor

Kenneth Cornett, Pastor  
Midlothian Baptist Church  
Midlothian

Joshua Cottrell, Pastor  
Mount Calvary Baptist Church  
South Chesterfield

Timothy Craver, Pastor  
Summit Church of the Brethren  
Bridgewater

Curtis Crawford, Pastor  
Deerfield Baptist Church  
Deerfield

Rick Crews, Lead Pastor  
Green Run Baptist Church  
Virginia Beach

Keith Crowgey, Pastor  
Cambria Baptist Church  
Christiansburg

Kenneth D'Auria  
Reformation Christian Fellowship  
Newport News

Miguel Davilla, Lead Pastor  
Hampton Roads Fellowship  
Newport News

Ryan Davidson, Pastor  
Grace Baptist Chapel  
Hampton

Leroy Davis, Pastor  
Hopeful Baptist Church  
Montpelier

Timothy L. Decker, Pastor  
Trinity Reformed Baptist Church  
Roanoke

Matthew DelValle, Pastor  
Bon Air Baptist Church  
Arlington

Luke Do, Senior Pastor  
Peninsula Korean Baptist Church  
Newport News

Stephen Doe, Pastor  
Orthodox Presbyterian Church  
Fredericksburg

Anthony Drabick, Pastor  
Covenant Community Church  
Martinsville

Jim Drake, Pastor  
Parkview Baptist Church  
Bluefield

Israel Easter, Pastor  
Lambsburg Missionary Baptist Church  
Lambsburg

Stephen Felker, Senior Pastor  
Swift Creek Baptist Church  
South Chesterfield

Roderick H. Fillinger, Pastor  
Occoquan Bible Church  
Woodbridge

Dr. Michael Fitzgerald, Senior Pastor  
Clifford Baptist Church  
Amherst

William Francavilla, Senior Pastor  
Relevant Church  
Williamsburg

Patrick Furgerson, Executive Minister  
New Life Christian Church  
Chantilly

Rod Fultz, Senior Pastor  
Grace Church of Gainesville  
Gainesville

Billy Gardner, Pastor  
Mill Swamp Baptist Church  
Ivor

Matthew Gaston, Senior Pastor  
Calvary Baptist Church  
Altavista

Pastor Jason Gault, Sr. Pastor  
Mineral Springs Baptist Church  
Vinton

Dr. Keith Goad, Lead Pastor  
Jefferson Park Baptist Church  
Charlottesville

Mike Godfrey, Pastor  
Redeemer Baptist Church  
Gainesville

Christopher Goerner, Assistant Pastor  
Calvary Memorial Church  
Roanoke

Bruce Goldsmith, Senior Pastor  
Laurel Hill Baptist Church  
Charlottesville

Fred Gray, Pastor  
Southside Baptist Church  
Suffolk

Dr. Bob Greene, Senior Pastor  
Boones Mill Baptist Church  
Boones Mill

Duane Guridy, Pastor  
Monumental Baptist Church  
Petersburg

Hamp Hall, Executive Pastor  
Laurel Hill Church  
Charlottesville

Dr. Daryl Harbin, Senior Pastor  
Zion Baptist Church  
Orange

Dr. Richard D. Harrell, Sr., Senior Pastor  
Ramoith Baptist Church  
Stafford

Glenn Hawkins, Pastor  
Grace United Family Church  
Mechanicsville

Jeremy Hendrick, Sr. Pastor  
Camo Church  
Woodlawn

Sanford Hendrick, Pastor  
Crooked Oak Baptist Church  
Hillsville

Dr. Thomas S. "Trey" Hensley, III  
Senior Pastor, The Camp Church  
Stephens City

Joshua B. Henson, Pastor  
Grace Covenant Church  
Virginia Beach

Lee Hess, Sr. Pastor  
Carrollton Baptist Church  
Carrollton

Peter Hess, Pastor  
Christ Fellowship Church of Williamsburg  
Williamsburg

Timothy Hight, Sr. Pastor  
GraceLife Baptist Church  
Christiansburg

Michael Hines, Pastor  
Foundations Church  
Williamsburg

James Hinton, Lead Pastor  
Mosaic of Winchester  
Winchester

Matthew Homan, Sr. Pastor  
Eureka Baptist Church  
Keysville

Michael Howard Jr., Pastor  
Seaford Baptist Church  
Seaford

Frank Howlett, Pastor  
Glenwood Community Church  
Virginia Beach

Dr. John T. Jicka, Senior Pastor  
Smith Memorial Baptist Church  
Williamsburg

J. Michael Jones, Senior Pastor  
Sedalia Baptist Church  
Big Island

Michael S. Jones, Pastor  
Memorial Baptist Church  
Pulaski

William Kang, Lead Pastor  
Gracepoint DMV  
Fairfax

Nathan Kassebaum, Pastor  
Cornerstone Bible Church  
Virginia Beach

Garrett Kell, Pastor  
Del Ray Baptist Church  
Alexandria

Darren L. King, Pastor  
North Stafford Baptist Church  
Stafford

Matthew Kirkland, Lead Pastor  
Crosslink Community Church  
Harrisonburg

Mike Klaassen, Pastor  
Poquoson Baptist Church  
Poquoson

Will Klotz, Pastor  
New City Fellowship  
Manassas

James L. Jones, Pastor  
Waverly Baptist Church  
Waverly

Neil Lieder, Pastor  
New Hope Church  
Providence Forge

Justin A. Likens, Pastor  
Westlake Baptist Church  
Moneta

Van L. Loomis, Jr., Pastor-Teacher  
Redeeming Grace Baptist Church  
Gloucester

Tim Ma, Senior Pastor  
Emmanuel Baptist Church  
Manassas

Charles Maney, Senior Pastor  
Mt. Tirzah Baptist Ch.  
Charlotte Court House

Rick Markham, Senior Pastor  
Calvary Baptist Church  
Danville

Randy Martin, Pastor  
Preston Oaks Baptist Church  
Roanoke

Anthony R. Mathenia, Pastor  
Christ Church-Radford  
Radford

Paul McLinden, Pastor  
Spring Creek Baptist Church  
Cullen

Chris McMillan, Sr. Pastor  
Providence Baptist Church  
Hayes

Dr. Henry M. Meadows Jr., Senior Pastor  
Marion Baptist  
Chatham

Jonathan Morton, Senior Pastor  
Oak Grove Baptist Church  
North Chesterfield

Greg Moser, Lead Pastor  
Green Ridge Baptist Church  
Roanoke

Dr. Mike Mueller, Senior Pastor  
Rock Hill Baptist Church  
Stafford

Troy Mueller, Senior Pastor  
Connection Community Church  
Roanoke

Ron Nickell, Pastor  
Mt. Ed Baptist Church  
Batesville

Jeff Noble, Pastor  
Northstar Church  
Blacksburg

Michael O'Brien, Sr. Pastor  
Redeeming Grace Baptist Church  
Lynchburg

Rev. Buz Offenbacher, Senior Pastor  
Staunton Baptist Church  
Huddleston

David Osborne, Pastor  
Mountain View Baptist Church  
Independence

Josh Osteen, Senior Pastor  
First Baptist Church  
Pennington Gap

Dr. Ronald D. Panebaker, Worship Pastor  
Oakland Baptist Church  
Richardsville

Ryan E. Patterson, Sr. Pastor  
Harvest Fellowship Baptist Church  
Gretna

Dr. Don Paxton, Sr. Pastor  
Rosedale Baptist  
Abingdon

Alan Pearce, Pastor  
Draper Valley Baptist Church  
Draper

David Peck, Associate Pastor  
Waverly Place Baptist Church  
Roanoke

Gary D. Perkins, Interim Pastor  
Cross Road Fellowship  
Richmond

Dr. Rob Pocheck, Senior Pastor  
First Baptist Church  
Charlottesville

John Pouchot, Sr Pastor  
Petworth Baptist Church  
Gloucester

David M. Prather, Pastor  
Second Chance Baptist Church  
Petersburg

David Price Sr., Pastor  
Grafton Baptist Church  
Yorktown

Jim Pulling, Jr., Lead Pastor  
Journey Christian Fellowship II  
Williamsburg

Benjamin Purves, Pastor  
Occoquan Bible Church  
Woodbridge

Scott Quinn, Pastor  
Travelers Rest Baptist Church  
Spotsylvania

Tim Radmore, Pastor  
Memorial Baptist Church of Louisa  
Louisa

Josué Raimundo, Pastor  
Iglesia Bíblica de la Gracia  
Alexandria

Rev. Tony Reeves, Pastor  
Mt. Nebo Baptist  
Keysville

James Reger, Senior Pastor  
Redeemer Church KG  
King George



Andy H. Rice, Sr. Pastor  
Providence Baptist Church  
Harrisonburg

Kenneth Rich, Pastor  
South Fork Baptist Church  
Marion

Dr. Jeffrey T. Riddle, Pastor  
Christ Reformed Baptist Church  
Louisa

Timothy Rhee, Pastor  
Gracepoint Fairfax Church  
Fairfax

Jeff Rose, Pastor  
FaithWalk Baptist Church  
Middletown

David Ross, Youth Pastor  
Occoquan Bible Church  
Woodbridge

E. Larry Ross, Interim Pastor  
Glasgow Baptist Church  
Glasgow

Jack Rutherford, Pastor  
Sharon Baptist Church  
Rural Retreat

Dr. J. Lindsay Sadler, Jr., Senior Pastor  
Mt. Holly Baptist  
Remington

Donald W. Sampson, DMin., Pastor  
Crossroads Presbyterian Church  
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David Schrock, Ph.D., Pastor for Preaching  
Occoquan Bible Church  
Woodbridge

Ben Scofield, Pastor  
West Suffolk Baptist Church  
Suffolk

David Sexton, Pastor  
Elon Baptist Church  
Pamplin

Sam Sieg, Pastor  
Lifesong Community Church  
Mineral

Nick Shaffer, Sr. Pastor  
West Salem Baptist Church  
Salem

Tommy Shell, Pastor  
First Baptist Church  
Pound

Tony Shepherd, Associate Pastor  
Hampton Roads Fellowship  
Newport News

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Alabaster House  
Lynchburg

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Danville

Corey Smallwood, Pastor  
New Life Baptist Church  
New Hope

Leslie W. Smith, Senior Pastor  
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Virginia Beach

Randall Snipes, Senior Pastor  
Oak Grove Baptist Church  
Colonial Beach

Rob Spencer, Pastor  
Church United  
Staunton

Terry C. St. John - Senior Pastor  
Hollywood Baptist Church  
Chatham

Phil Stevens, Sr. Pastor  
Winfall Baptist Church  
Winfall

Gary Stewart, Sr. Pastor  
Beaverdam Baptist Church  
Beaverdam

Scott A. Stewart, Pastor  
Sharon Baptist Church  
Danville

Paul Strassner Sr., Senior Pastor  
Shenandoah Baptist Church  
Shenandoah

Tom Strode, Pastor  
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Fredericksburg

James Taylor, Senior Pastor  
Red Lane Baptist Church  
Powhatan

Wes Taylor, Sr. Pastor  
Temple Baptist Church  
Newport News

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Ironbridge Church  
Chester

Adam Triplett, Lead Pastor  
Waverly Place Baptist Church  
Roanoke

Mark Vaughan, Senior Pastor  
Calvary Memorial Church  
Roanoke

G. Mark Washington, Sr. Pastor  
Hollins Road Baptist Church  
Roanoke

Fred Weymouth, Pastor  
BridgePoint Church  
Gloucester

W. Bryan Wheeler, Sr. Pastor  
Emmanuel Baptist Church  
Verona

Douglas Wayne Williams, Pastor  
Oaklawn Baptist Church  
South Chesterfield

Fred Williams, Pastor  
Riverside Baptist Church  
Norfolk

Westly Yoder, Sr. Pastor  
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Buckingham

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