



**ST. JOSEPH COUNTY**  
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH  
Prevent. Promote. Protect.

## St. Joseph County Department of Health

*"Promoting physical and mental health and facilitating the prevention of disease, injury and disability for all St. Joseph County residents"*

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President, Board of Health

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Vice President, Board of Health

October 13, 2020

Dear Faith Community Leader,

As you may know, the number of COVID-19 cases in St. Joseph County has been on a steady rise over the last several weeks. There are currently 1,249 active cases of COVID-19 in the county, which corresponds to 460 cases per 100,000 population. In addition, our hospitals are experiencing increased strain, both on the availability of hospital beds and on the available health care workforce to provide care for patients in the county.

In an effort to identify the most effective public health interventions to help control the spread of the coronavirus, we undertook (with the help of the Indiana Department of Health) a cluster analysis of common features in the exposure histories of individuals in St. Joseph County diagnosed with COVID-19 over the past six weeks. This cluster analysis revealed five clusters associated with attendance at churches/faith communities/congregations in St. Joseph County. While this analysis is not conclusive, it does underscore the risks associated with large gatherings, particularly indoors.

With the arrival of cooler weather and the traditional influenza season looming on the horizon, we write this letter to urge all faith communities in St. Joseph County to pivot to on-line or virtual worship formats from now through March 2021. We can appreciate that this represents a prolonged period, but we feel that avoiding large, in-person gatherings throughout the duration of the flu season will be beneficial for our community in the midst of this pandemic.

We recognize that not all faith communities will share our sense of urgency related to either the status or the impact of COVID-19 in our community. We are happy to review COVID-19 safety plans for congregations intending to continue in-person worship; however, we will also be compelled to respond to any complaints we receive regarding safety concerns identified in any establishments in the county, including churches.

We would be happy to discuss any questions or concerns that you have related to this request. Thank you for your continuing care of our community and your attention to this request.

Sincerely,

Robert Einterz, MD  
Health Officer

Mark D. Fox, MD, PhD, MPH  
Deputy Health Officer