



WISCONSIN COUNCIL
OF CHURCHES
COURAGE. JUSTICE. HOLY IMAGINATION.

May 6, 2025

To: Members of the Committee on Judiciary
From: Rev. Breanna Illéné, Director of Ecumenical Innovation and Justice Initiatives, Wisconsin Council of Churches
Re: Testimony for information only on AJR 10

The Wisconsin Council of Churches (WCC) is a network of Christian churches and faith-based organizations committed to working together across our many differences to promote the collective good. We connect 23 Christian traditions, which have within them approximately 2,000 congregations and over one million church members. Exercising holy imagination, we help one another make courageous choices that lead toward peacemaking, social and economic justice for Wisconsin's most vulnerable residents, the vitality of the church, and the well-being of our neighbors.

We appreciate legislators' concern for safeguarding religious freedom and their recognition of the vital services that houses of worship provide, not only for their members but also for the wider community.

However, we wish to raise two concerns about this particular piece of legislation.

First, public statements and reporting about the effect of public health emergency orders on houses of worship very often misrepresent what is actually at stake for religious communities. A church or other house of worship is not "closed" or "shut down" simply because in-person gatherings are restricted due to public health or safety concerns. If the term, "house of worship" implies a building or other physical structure, that doesn't by any means capture everything that a community of faith is or does.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, we learned from letters, surveys, and conversations with faith leaders that congregations continued to meet their members' and their communities' needs despite limits on in-person indoor gatherings. In many cases, they found that the new measures required by the public health emergency enabled them to reach people that they hadn't been able to connect with before.

Second, it isn't clear why or whether this sort of specific policy ought to be written into the state constitution. If a certain public health order actually does infringe on someone's religious freedom, is anything more than the existing constitutional language really necessary? Won't the new language raise questions of how "house of worship" is defined, or what terms like "closure" or "forbidding gatherings" actually mean in practice? Given the many other ways that the state might infringe on religious liberty or freedom of conscience, why should orders pertaining to public health emergencies be singled out in the state constitution?

Decisions about what particular measures are needed to protect the lives and health of the public and how to balance them against the claims of individual rights and freedom are extremely difficult matters for judgment. Making good choices about what to do in a public emergency requires closely attending to the particular circumstances at hand and using the best information and understanding available at the time. Trying to define the options in advance, without any clear idea of exactly what we could be facing in the future, is unwise. It short-circuits the sort of careful, informed public deliberation that is essential when the life and health of Wisconsin residents, especially those who are most vulnerable, hang in the balance.

Care for people's health and well-being is common to the practices of diverse religious traditions and to the mission of our public health professionals and civil servants. We need to support both as they help us reach the shared goal of a Wisconsin in which everyone can thrive. And we must not underestimate the adaptability and resilience of Wisconsin's faith communities, nor limit our understanding of their ability to meet the needs of their members and communities even in extraordinary circumstances.

Thank you for your attention to our concerns.



WISCONSIN COUNCIL
OF CHURCHES

COURAGE. JUSTICE. HOLY IMAGINATION.

To: Members of the Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety
From: Rev. Breanna Illéné, Director of Ecumenical Innovation and Justice Initiatives, Wisconsin Council of Churches
Date: February 26, 2025
Re: Testimony in opposition to AB 24

The Wisconsin Council of Churches (WCC) is a network of Christian churches and faith-based organizations committed to working together across our many differences to promote collective good. We connect 23 Christian traditions, which have within them approximately 2,000 congregations and over one million church members. Exercising holy imagination, we help one another make courageous choices that lead toward peacemaking, social and economic justice for Wisconsin's most vulnerable residents, the vitality of the church, and the well-being of our neighbors.

We appreciate legislators' concern for safeguarding religious freedom and their recognition of the vital services that houses of worship provide, not only for their members but also for the wider community. However, we wish to raise two concerns about this particular piece of legislation.

First, public statements and reporting about the effect of public health emergency orders on houses of worship very often misrepresent what is actually at stake for religious communities. A church or other house of worship is not "closed" or "shut down" simply because in-person gatherings are restricted due to public health or safety concerns. If the term, "house of worship" implies a building or other physical structure, that doesn't by any means capture everything that a community of faith is or does.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, we learned from letters, surveys, and conversations with faith leaders that congregations continued to meet their members' and their communities' needs in spite of limits on in-person indoor gatherings. In many cases, they found that the new measures required by the public health emergency enabled them to reach people that they hadn't been able to connect with before.

Second, it isn't clear why or whether this sort of specific policy ought to be written into the state constitution. If a certain public health order actually does infringe on someone's religious freedom, is anything more than the existing constitutional language really necessary? Won't the new language raise questions of how "house of worship" is defined, or what terms like "closure" or "forbidding gatherings" actually mean in practice? Given the many other ways that the state might infringe on religious liberty or freedom of conscience, why should orders pertaining to public health emergencies be singled out in the state constitution?

Decisions about what particular measures are needed to protect the lives and health of the public and how to balance them against the claims of individual rights and freedom are extremely difficult matters for judgment. Making good choices about what to do in a public emergency requires closely attending to the particular circumstances at hand and using the best information and understanding available at the time. Trying to define the options in advance, without any clear idea of exactly what we could be facing in the future, is unwise. It short-circuits the sort of careful, informed public deliberation that is essential when the life and health of Wisconsin residents, especially those who