To: Rep. Chuck Wichgers, Committee Chair
        Members of the Assembly Committee on Constitution and Ethics

From: Peter Bakken, Coordinator for Justice and Witness, Wisconsin Council of Churches

Date: March 3, 2021

Re: Testimony for information only on Assembly Bill 24

Thank you for this opportunity to submit written testimony on Assembly Bill 24, relating to closure and forbidding gatherings in places of worship. I am grateful that you recognize that members of the public must be allowed to inform committee deliberations while staying safe in the current pandemic.

I write on behalf of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, a network of twenty-one Christian faith traditions with approximately 2,000 congregations and over one million church members in Wisconsin. Following the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves, we work together to uphold the common good and the well-being of the most vulnerable.

While we appreciate legislators' concern for religious freedom and congregations' longing to gather for worship, those values must be weighed against the deadly seriousness of our situation, the need to respect science, and the temptation to abuse our freedom to the detriment of others.

The COVID-19 public health crisis has cost over 500,000 lives in the U.S., nearly 6,500 of them in Wisconsin. Making it through this crisis will not be easy. In order to protect one another's lives and livelihoods, we need to do things that are difficult and limiting, and we depend on strong, responsible, community-wide leadership to give direction and support.

Our public health agencies and officials at all levels of government provide essential guidance for how we can best safeguard the life and health of ourselves and our neighbors: wear a mask, wash your hands, watch your distance. We are deeply grateful for their dedication, and we cannot allow their efforts to be undermined by antagonism, complacency, or mistrust. Rather, we must all work together, endorsing the science-based recommendations of experts and supporting the officials who are striving to put in place the measures needed to protect the health of all our neighbors.

The Wisconsin Council of Churches encourages our members to participate as faithful citizens in the democratic process, in part to help establish governments which can be trusted to lead us through difficult times. While we much prefer consensus and voluntary cooperation to mandates, mandates may be needed in times of crisis. When public health is at stake, we cannot defend notions of personal freedom – or even religious freedom – as freedom to endanger the life and health of our neighbors in order to pursue our own interests or desires. Instead, we should use our freedom with courage and imagination to meet our spiritual needs without encouraging the spread of the coronavirus – as congregations all across Wisconsin have been doing for the past year.

The Council is a network of diverse churches, and our members are not of one mind when it comes to whether their buildings should be open or closed for activity. It must be remembered that a church itself is not "closed" just because its members are not physically gathering. Many vital religious activities, including worship, can be done remotely when in-person gatherings are unsafe. The vast majority of our member churches have been taking COVID very seriously. They have sought counsel from their local health department and medical professionals in their midst, and made use of denominational resources and those we have compiled, with input from public health experts, specifically for churches.

Whatever your decision as a committee about Assembly Bill 24, we urge you not to drive a wedge between faith and science, between public health agencies and the communities they serve, or between personal freedom and responsibility for one's neighbor. To do so would not only be a disservice to the ideals of Wisconsin's worshipping communities, but to the constituents who look to you for leadership in this crisis.

Thank you for your attention to our concerns.