



St. Johns County Board of County Commissioners

Office of the County Attorney

April 3, 2020

Pastor Earl Glisson
Anchor Faith Church
2121 US Hwy 1 South, STE 28
St. Augustine, FL 32086

Dear Pastor Glisson,

Thank you very much for having your Church reach out to the County regarding holding religious services under the present circumstances and Governor's emergency Executive Orders.

As you know, a number of emergency orders and proclamations have been issued, including by the federal, and state governments. You will understand, that those agencies are responsible for interpreting their own orders and proclamations. I will also note that the emergency orders and proclamations are subject to change, as are the circumstances on the ground. So please understand that my response reflects only our best understanding of the orders/proclamations under the circumstances as they are now.

St. Johns County has issued an emergency proclamation declaring a local state of emergency, and has extended that in seven (7) day intervals. Pursuant to that proclamation and applicable County ordinances, the County has also issued orders closing the beaches and has taken additional steps to limit the spread of COVID-19 through the closure or limiting use of certain public facilities, and vacation rentals, among other things. The County has NOT, however, issued an order or proclamation prohibiting the holding of religious services. In any event, recent orders by the Governor would appear at present to prohibit the County from prohibiting the holding of religious services.

In particular, Wednesday (4/1/20), the Governor issued Executive Order 2020-91, also referred to as the "Safer at Home" Order. Under this order, effective 12:01 a.m. on April 3 (this morning), senior citizens and "individuals with a significant underlying medical condition" are directed to stay at home and "all persons in Florida" are directed to limit their movements and interactions outside the home "to only those necessary to obtain or provide essential services or conduct essential activities." **"Attending religious services conducted in churches, synagogues and houses of worship" is specifically listed as an "essential activity."** It would appear, then, that, under the Safer at Home Order, members of the general public may still attend religious services. Please note, though, I have not found that the order includes an exception for religious services from the direction that senior citizens or individuals with a significant underlying medical condition stay at home. This may require further clarification from the Governor.

Additionally, while the Safer at Home Order addresses whether individuals (other than as stated above) can attend religious services, it does not itself specifically address whether or how churches, synagogues, or houses of worship can hold such services. The CDC and the Florida Department of Health have provided some guidance which, while they do not appear to be mandatory, do provide some steps to take to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. Some of those materials can be found at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html>; <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/3-17-20-faith-and-community-based-covid-19-faq.pdf>; <https://floridahealthcovid19.gov/community-events/>. I would urge you to please review these materials and follow their recommendations. I would note that the Miami-Dade County Emergency Order 07-20 (referenced by the Governor's Executive Order 2020-91), urges, but does not require social distancing as described therein for religious services.

That is how the matter stands as of this moment. Additionally, you may want to consult with a medical advisor as how to best safely conduct services.

Stay safe.



Patrick F. McCormack
County Attorney
St. Johns County