SUPREME COURT NOT THE HIGHEST AUTHORITY
FOR CHURCH DECISIONS ON WHEN TO GATHER

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(STATEWIDE) - The decision of Wisconsin's Supreme Court in *Wisconsin Legislature vs. Palm* late this afternoon was disappointing, but not unexpected. It was clear from oral arguments that our state's ongoing partisan divide was active among the justices, and a spirit of cooperation for the public good was not at work as parties listened to one another and reflected on the purpose and impact of the matters at hand. We grieve the realities of human brokenness, both individual and systemic, that have led our state to this point.

As a result of these longstanding dysfunctions revealed in press conferences, the broadcasting of oral arguments, and transmission of the court's decision, many people will suffer. As gradual reopening plans are set aside, the wise counsel of public health experts will not be heeded. Countless residents of Wisconsin will be placed at risk. Those who are called back to work because their employers reopen, without protective gear or sufficient distancing from their coworkers, will face difficult decisions. Front-line health care personnel still dealing with exhaustion from a first wave of illness, will have to prepare immediately for further spread. Those who are especially vulnerable will be at even higher risk. With economic injustice already rampant, this is the time to make choices that support the vulnerable, rather than sacrifice them in an impossible quest for short-term victory over a virus that will be with us for a long time.

The Wisconsin Council of Churches has been a witness to many local faith communities putting their faith into action during the pandemic. We know that it is possible to overcome partisan, geographic, religious, and many other kinds of divides in order to put the common good first. Many have continued offering food pantries, community meals, and mutual aid to respond to urgent community needs. Simultaneously, they have moved other ministries online, as we described in our letter of support for the *amicus curiae* brief submitted by Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice.

Today's Supreme Court decision striking down 'Safer at Home' did not include the 6-day stay of the ruling requested by the Legislature. This creates conditions for confusion, chaos and increased anxiety among the general population. As a network of churches and faith leaders, we believe such conditions are antithetical to creating communities where all can thrive. **Churches need not be guided nor rushed by this decision into a hasty choice to reopen for worship.** "The minimum requirements of the law are not necessarily the mark by which the Church should measure its behavior," said Rev. Kerri Parker, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Council of Churches. "Instead, we are guided by pastoral and prudential concerns; our commitment to love God and to care for one another. This is one of the deepest lessons Jesus Christ taught his followers, and of critical importance in this moment of communal vulnerability. The Supreme Court decision doesn't change the health conditions in our communities, the availability of testing or of equipment to protect medical personnel, nor does it change our recommendations that churches should abstain from gathering in physical space for some time." The Council will continue to work diligently to support faith communities working across difference in order to adapt their ministries for a time such as this.

The Wisconsin Council of Churches documents, *Returning to Church* and *Returning to Church: Church Music* have been shared by judicatories and churches nationwide, and are available online at *wichurches.org*. The Council is a network of 20 Christian traditions and faith-based organizations committed to working and praying together for church unity and renewal, and the healing and reconciliation of the world.