

March 16, 2020

Dear church family,

While our area has been relatively unaffected by the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), I am greatly concerned about our congregation and our community. To this end, I am writing to tell you what we as a church are doing to protect everyone in the very best way we can.

As people everywhere attempt to make sense of this global pandemic, we must remember that this too shall pass. Maybe not as quickly or as quietly as we would like, but it will. And God will still be on the throne. God is neither surprised nor caught off guard.

We can walk through fearful circumstances and yet not be afraid. We can have peace knowing that our lives—and our futures—are in God's hands.

We have a great opportunity to share God's comfort and love with those who have yet to take their first step of faith. So let us be wise with our words that we might be beacons of hope, not harbingers of despair.

The Church Council met yesterday with the Trustees and the Finance Committee to develop a plan of response to the COVID-19 virus. We made the decision to cancel all gatherings at the church except for Sunday morning worship and Sunday school for the remainder of this month. We appointed a group including myself, Pat Briggs, Janet Sanders, and Jaime Husen to make week to week decisions about worship and to communicate those decisions on Wednesday each week.

Local authorities and public health officials continue to make recommendations regarding safety measures such as frequent hand washing and this morning the CDC said to limit group meetings to less than 50 people. The recommendations will result in limiting the contact you have with our congregation. We will do our best to continue to provide support and connection and, perhaps, discover new ways to be in community now and in the future.

Expand our prayer ministry.

More than anything, we need to come together in prayer. With anxiety being high, it will be reassuring to know that our church is praying together and for each other. I will be using our Facebook page to share regular devotions and prayers that enables you to stay grounded in God and connected to each other.

How Our Church Will Provide Support and Stay Connected During Coronavirus?

Provide frequent email updates.

When we have substantive updates, we will send an email and a text to everyone that we have contact information for. We will also send regular mail to members that we do not have electronic contacts for. This would be a great time to share your cell phone number and email with us if we currently don't have it.

Preventative measures.

I want to reinforce the steps we sent last week outlining steps we are taking to prevent the spread of the virus.

1. Clean your hands often
 - a. Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds especially after you have been in a public place, or after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.
 - b. If soap and water are not readily available, use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol. Cover all surfaces of your hands and rub them together until they feel dry.
 - c. Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
2. Avoid close contact with people who are sick
 - a. Put distance between yourself and other people if COVID-19 is spreading in your community. This is especially important for people who are at higher risk of getting very sick.
 - b. Encourage everyone to observe a 4-foot distance from others. I suggest a new gesture of greeting, like folding your hands over your heart and then opening them palms out and up — in a sign of connection.
3. Stay home if you're sick
 - a. Stay home if you are sick, except to get medical care. Learn what to do if you are sick.
4. Cover coughs and sneezes
 - a. Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze using the inside of your elbow.
 - b. Throw used tissues in the trash.
 - c. Immediately wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not readily available, clean your hands with a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.
5. Wear a facemask if you are sick
 - a. If you are sick: You should wear a facemask when you are around other people (e.g., sharing a room or vehicle) and before you enter a healthcare provider's office. If you are not able to wear a facemask (for example, because it causes trouble breathing), then you should do your best to cover your coughs and sneezes, and people who are caring for you should wear a facemask if they enter your room. Learn what to do if you are sick.
 - b. If you are NOT sick: You do not need to wear a facemask unless you are caring for someone who is sick (and they are not able to wear a facemask). Facemasks may be in short supply and they should be saved for caregivers.
6. Clean and disinfect
 - a. Clean AND disinfect frequently touched surfaces daily. This includes tables, doorknobs, light switches, countertops, handles, desks, phones, keyboards, toilets, faucets, and sinks.
 - b. If surfaces are dirty, clean them: Use detergent or soap and water prior to disinfection.

To those steps we decided to place offering baskets in a fixed location rather than passing collection plates.

Upgrading technology.

We are currently working on various ways to live stream our Sunday morning worship. The sermon is already available on our website. If we cancel some services or not, this will help everyone continue to feel connected despite not physically being together.

Promote electronic giving.

I know that you will still want to make contributions even if you are not in worship. Our website provides an easy and accessible way for you to make contributions through online giving.

Use social media.

Now is a good time to connect to us on Facebook. In addition to our other communication channels we will be using our Facebook page and group to keep connected. There is a good chance we will be using Facebook Live to livestream our Sunday morning services. When the impact of the Coronavirus is behind us, we will have strengthened our online presence which will help us well into the future.

We will have someone available to answer the church phone as long as we can.

I encourage Sunday School and Small Group Leaders to use Facebook Groups, Google Hangout, Zoom Meeting, Skype or other online meeting tools to continue to meet.

Many people are already using these tools in professional settings, so it wouldn't be a stretch to use them for small group gatherings. If you need some help with this give us a call.

Keep the Faith

During times of crisis is when God's people are often at their best. While we pray for the people affected by this virus, we also pray for all people suffering, hurting, and in need. God's people may meet in a building, but the church is not limited to a geographic location.

Be bold and courageous during this time. Look for ways to continue to meet the needs of friends and our community while being responsive to public health concerns. The increased use of social media, online viewing, electronic giving, growing prayer ministries, and better connection to each other will all leave the church in a stronger position after the virus passes. God's people will experience God's abundant care and faithfulness when we walk in prayerful obedience and faith.

Note: The Coronavirus news can cause concern. To stay up-to-date on the latest information from the World Health Organization (WHO), <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

Grace and peace,

Pastor Curtis