

A Statement of Care and Compassion Concerning the Coronavirus Outbreak

March 12, 2020

Steps to Handwashing



The emergence of a global health crisis, last month of a novel coronavirus, now called COVID-19, is causing increased worry in an already anxious world. The Church is called to be in prayer for those affected by the virus, those caring for the affected, including those in the medical and scientific industry trying to diagnose and treat patients, as well as effectively prevent, detect and respond to this virus. COVID-19 is with us now and God is calling us to be The Church in our response. We ask that you prepare your churches to do a checkup. Certainly, at this point, the conclusion we come to should not be that being together is dangerous. Additionally, it is too early to conclude that Communion should be suspended. After all, receiving Holy Communion has a much lower risk of spreading infection than shaking hands does. We will await instruction from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) regarding any change in our shared practices. Therefore, we offer the following guidelines to you that we might worship and share together in The Lord during this critical time.

Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Should churches be impacted by Coronavirus (COVID-19) or any other epidemic or pandemic-level illness, the Mississippi Conference and its local churches will take direction from the CDC, state health agencies and our local city/county health department. At the time of this update [updated 3/9/20], there has been at least one “presumptive positive” case of coronavirus (COVID-19) in Forrest County.

The Mississippi Department of Health is providing regular updates on their website and the CDC's is providing updated information for community and faith-based leadership. The Mississippi Department of Health recommends the same preventative measures for COVID-19 as they do to reduce the spread of the flu – good hand-washing, staying home when you're sick, etc. You can find a general Coronavirus-related fact sheet on their website.

For this reason, continue your usual worship schedule or practice unless you are notified by the local, county, state, or federal authorities to discontinue gatherings. At this time we do not believe that local churches should alter their worship schedule or practices unless the church community itself has been impacted by an epidemic-level illness (e.g., a chicken pox outbreak in the preschool, mumps outbreak in a college-age ministry group or influenza within a nursing home where the church conducts regular services). However, it is natural that church leaders and members wonder about the risk of participating in worship, including hand-shaking, hugging, passing the offering plate and sharing the bread and cup of Holy Communion. That said, there are a couple of best practices and strategies available to all local churches to help protect the community from the spread of disease and illness.

Worship Practices

- *Work with janitorial staff for regular environmental cleaning with bleach and to keep the restrooms stocked with hand soap.
- *Ask your hospitality volunteers to make sure that there are facial tissues and hand sanitizer stocked and available for worship services.
- *Give people permission to stay at home if they are experiencing illness symptoms (i.e., cough, shortness of breath) of any kind.
- *Consider placing pause on "Passing of the Peace" rituals for the time being. At the very least, invite parishioners who are experiencing symptoms or those who are uncomfortable to refrain from handshaking during the Peace. Consider adopting an alternative way to share the Peace (e.g., fist bumps, elbow bumps, friendly waves and peace signs).
- *Consider setting out baskets or offering plates for people to drop their offerings in rather than pass through the pews. Don't forget to include the regular cleaning of offering plates to your cleaning schedule.

Holy Communion Practices

- *Limit communion servers to those who do NOT appear to have illness symptoms (i.e., cough, shortness of breath).
- *Be sure that Communion chalices, cups, trays, cup fillers, and patens (plates) are washed as thoroughly as any other dishes you might use at home (hot water, dish soap or detergent) before and very soon after each use and stored in a dry, clean cabinet.
- *Prepare fresh elements with clean hands. People who have any communicable illness, including colds, should not prepare or serve communion.
- *Prior to the Eucharistic prayer, have Communion stewards exit the worship space to wash hands with soap and water at the nearest facility.
- *Include the "Sacrament of Purell" as a part of the preparation. Have all servers publicly use alcohol-based hand sanitizer prior to handling the elements. Consider inviting people coming forward for communion to sanitize their hands prior to receiving. Allow your hands to dry naturally prior to reaching for the elements.
- *Instruct servers not to touch their face after washing their hands and using the sanitizer.
- *If Holy Communion is received by intinction (dipping the bread in the cup), be sure to have only the servers touch the loaf. (The practice of individuals breaking off the bread for themselves greatly increases the risk for contamination).
- *Instruct servers of the bread to provide pieces of bread that are large enough to be dipped into the cup without the recipient's fingers needing to touch the juice.
- *Instruct servers of the cup to tilt the cup slightly toward the recipients to enable the juice to flow toward the bread, thus eliminating a perceived need to "plunge" the bread (and perhaps

fingers!) into the cup. For this season, you might ask parents to help dip their children's bread into the cup.

*If your congregation is still using individual cups, be sure to have a server who has washed his or her hands give the cup to each recipient, being careful not to touch the hands of the recipient. The server should not touch any used cups, nor should those receiving place used cups back into the trays. The use of disposable cups is not recommended for environmental, health, and aesthetic reasons. These cups may not be recyclable in some communities (despite the claims of vendors to the contrary), are not delivered in sanitary packaging, do not generally stand up well under washing conditions (those labeled "boilable" are nearly as expensive as glass and are not designed to last as long), and, by being disposable, are not designed for a reverent disposition of remaining juice.

Home-bound and Hospital Visitation

*If you are experiencing illness symptoms (i.e., cough, shortness of breath) of any kind, you should not be visiting the sick and ill.

*It is strongly recommended that pastors and visitors to hospitals and the home-bound have up-to-date vaccinations including the influenza vaccination. This is to protect the person in the hospital or ill at home as much as the receiver of the vaccination.

*If you are unvaccinated person or someone who is at high risk for influenza complications, you might consider wearing a mask when visiting hospitals and the home-bound.

*Pack a travel bag with alcohol-based hand sanitizer to use before and after visits. After leaving someone's room, move to a handwashing area to wash with soap and water.

*Consider increasing your telephone contact with those in the hospital and home-bound. For senior citizens at home, who may be watching a lot of news coverage, please consider how they may have increased anxieties and worries over the outbreak. Regular contact via phone may help calm nerves and not make them feel so isolated.

*If the pandemic increases to affect U.S.-based communities on a much larger scale, consider your plan to provide care and support for those affected in your setting. How will pastoral care be offered? How will relevant and appropriate information be shared about those affected?

When communicating with community members, be mindful of healthcare privacy laws (i.e., HIPAA). Visit the CDC for their pandemic influenza preparedness checklist: <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/pdf/faithbasedcommunitychecklist.pdf>.

Stewardship

At a time as this, ministry must continue more now than ever before. Ministry requires funds and we definitely need to be able to do as God has called to serve the least, the last and the lost. We also need to meet our individual need to give. Many people outside your church, as well, may want to give and it is our responsibility to help meet that need also. But, we also want to protect our gracious givers from being exposed to COVID-19 or any other illness. So, we must look at giving to the church in many different ways. Following are some suggestions that you might want to consider:

1. In lieu of passing the offering plates in the service, have offering plates at all exits so that people may give to God as they leave the service. Be sure to have your counters practice safety before, during and after counting those funds.
2. Those who are not able to attend church or feel that they should not for many reasons may be encouraged to give in one of these ways:

- a. Encourage mailing the check to the church office.
- b. If you have electronic giving in place, prepare a new announcement to remind your people of this.
- c. Quickly work to establish electronic giving if you have not done so. Check with your local bank or vendors that you know can help with this.
- d. The General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA) has a relationship established with Vanco for electronic giving for our local churches. You may contact them at 855-712-8745 or sign up at: www.vancopayments.com

The silver lining in this cloud about electronic giving is simply this. Now we will have ways for people to give to the church that we have talked about but never really had a reason to establish. Now we do. Paying close attention to our stewardship is vital for the mission and ministry of God as well as allowing each of us to give back to God based on God's generosity to us!

Global or Domestic Mission Trips

Advise staff and volunteers before traveling to take certain steps:

*Check the CDC's Traveler's Health Notices for the latest guidance and recommendations for each country to which you will travel. Specific travel information for travelers going to and returning from China, and information for aircrew, can be found at on the CDC website.

*Advise employees to check themselves for symptoms of acute respiratory illness before starting travel and notify their supervisor and stay home if they are sick.

*Ensure employees who become sick while traveling or on temporary assignment understand that they should notify their supervisor and should promptly call a healthcare provider for advice if needed.

*If outside the United States, sick employees should follow the team's insurance policy for obtaining medical care or contact a healthcare provider or overseas medical assistance company to assist them with finding an appropriate healthcare provider in that country. A U.S. consular officer can help locate healthcare services. However, U.S. embassies, consulates, and military facilities do not have the legal authority, capability, and resources to evacuate or give medicines, vaccines, or medical care to private U.S. citizens overseas.

Local Church Staff/Volunteers

Actively encourage sick staff and volunteers to stay home and send employees who appear to have illness symptoms (i.e., cough, shortness of breath) home.

Emphasize staying home when sick, continue to educate and remind staff and volunteers about respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene by all:

*Place posters that encourage staying home when sick, cough and sneeze etiquette, and hand hygiene at the entrance to your workplace and in other workplace areas where they are likely to be seen.

*Provide tissues and no-touch disposal receptacles for use by staff and volunteers.

*Instruct staff and volunteers to clean their hands often with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60-95% alcohol, or wash their hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Soap and water should be used preferentially if hands are visibly dirty.

*Provide soap and water and alcohol-based hand rubs in the workplace. Ensure that adequate supplies are maintained. Place hand rubs in multiple locations or in conference rooms to encourage hand hygiene.

*Visit the coughing and sneezing etiquette and clean hands webpage for more information.
https://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/hygiene/etiquette/coughing_sneezing.html

Perform routine environmental cleaning:

*Routinely clean all frequently touched surfaces in the workplace, such as workstations, countertops, and doorknobs. Use the cleaning agents that are usually used in these areas and follow the directions on the label.

*No additional disinfection beyond routine cleaning is recommended at this time.

*Provide disposable wipes so that commonly used surfaces (for example, doorknobs, keyboards, remote controls, desks) can be wiped down by employees before each use.

Additional Thoughts for Church Leaders

(Some material adapted from Office of General Minister and President of the Christian Church/Disciples of Christ)

***Be mindful of prejudices that can surface during moments of fear:** Let us be mindful of the racial and potentially racist overtones and attitudes that can be present in public accounts of the Coronavirus. As the Coronavirus expands across multiples countries and parts of the world, we know that communities are in need of our solidarity and support in these times of need. Let our faithful response be centered in compassion and care rather than fear, isolation, or division.

***Educate and calm fears:** Faith leaders can help educate and calm fears, providing information about risk assessment and best prevention practices. This can happen in worship, newsletters, public bulletin boards, and educational settings. Seek the wisdom of parish nurses and medical professionals within your congregation and community as their professional training provides an informed understanding that can be shared.

***Create spaces for prayer:** Use pastoral prayers, prayer meetings and other opportunities to encourage prayer for those suffering, those responding, and those seeking to mitigate the harm caused by the virus.

Crisis Planning and Health Information

*Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), "Crises In Your Church: A Guide for Congregational Planning to Handle the Unexpected"

*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers to Plan and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), February ”

*World Health Organization, “Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) advice for the public”

*Faith-based & Community Organizations Pandemic Influence Preparedness Checklist: <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/pdf/faithbasedcommunitychecklist.pdf>

Church Rituals and Public Safety

*Washington Post, “Sip from the common cup? On Ash Wednesday, coronavirus and the flu have religious leaders tweaking rituals.”

*Clean Hands and Pure Hearts: Hygiene and Holy Communion, Discipleship Ministries: <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/clean-hands-and-pure-hearts-hygiene-and-holy-communion>

*How to Help: <https://www.umc.org/en/content/coronavirus-what-to-know-how-to-help>

Prejudice and the Coronavirus

*Columbia Journalism Review, “The new coronavirus and racist tropes ”

*The Economist, “The pathogen of prejudice: The coronavirus spreads racism against—and among— ethnic Chinese ”

*The Jakarta Post, “Stop prejudice, the novel coronavirus has no race”

*An article that helps remind us that the virus affects real people and an ethic of care is essential as we talk about the pandemic from Emory University, “Coronavirus, Community & Compassion.”

Additional Websites:

<https://www.umnews.org/en/news/adjusting-to-coronavirus-threat>