

Good people of Great Rivers Presbytery,

Many of you have reached out to ask what is the “presbytery’s stance” on canceling worship in response to slowing the spread of COVID-19. I am so very encouraged to see how intentional you are being about deliberating options! I hear a desire to be responsible, smart, and proactive. This is a time to love one another individually and corporately (and do not forget the self!). Perhaps if you are on social media the last thing you need is more words on HOW YOU SHOULD RESPOND AS A PASTOR RIGHT NOW, but I offer to you all a 20,000 foot view of the presbytery landscape on the presbytery’s responses to COVID-19.

As Lead Presbyter, in collaboration with the Stated Clerk, **our primary recommendation is that you be safe**, and wise in how you do that together. Part of the way we discern wisdom is through the voice of the local session, and it remains the responsibility of the session to discern if, how, and when to change, alter, or postpone worship. You already know which responses are best for your context. Some of you have cancelled the next few weeks of worship, either as a precaution or a model to others in exemplifying community care. Others of you are experimenting with new technologies to experience communal worship in a different way. Some of you have long had robust sanitation measures in place as a regular part of your church culture, while others are aware that you have a small, susceptible population vulnerable to disease. Some folks are well accustomed to technology and would welcome experimentation, while others depend on your church context to provide the only reliable source of information on COVID-19 they know how to access. Whatever anxiety you may or may not be carrying in your heartspaces, we trust you to know and direct the most responsible action for the well being of your community, and for the mission of your congregation. If you are in doubt, we affirm your instincts in taking the more proactive protective measures. In pandemics, even the most overly cautious approach reveals itself in the end as the best case scenario.

Yesterday and today I have spoken with several officials from different health departments in our region, including the Rock Island, Peoria, McLean, and Sangamon Counties, and also the Illinois Department of Public Health. All are noting that preventative care is wise but not mandatory, and that we are encouraged to follow the explicit directives of the CDC. Some did have some more specific recommendations for churches; which are listed at the end of this letter. Continue to access the many resources available to you from your community, from the denomination, and from your instincts.

What makes our largely rural presbytery in west central Illinois unique as a region, even if at the time of this writing we have no confirmed cases of COVID-19, is that we do link the Midwest together with several high travelled transportation routes and residential centers between major urban populations such as Chicago, St. Louis, and Indianapolis, including the capital of the state with some of the higher but not highest confirmed cases of the disease. Many of our church communities are situated along major access corridors to these populations. Furthermore, because we are largely rural, that would mean diminished access to health resources in the event of a regional pandemic, particularly in the more isolated areas. Where our presbytery is ahead of the curve is in the way in which we have already formally adopted the use virtual technology for the formal business of the presbytery. At this time, in consultation with the Stated Clerk, the established committees of the presbytery are called to suspend formal in-person committee gatherings, and instead utilize email/ZOOM technology. Because we have already been practicing these methods, we do not anticipate disruption of the work of the presbytery.

One theological challenge for all of us now is how can we understand these challenges, these circumstances, these adaptations in the larger context of Lent? What might it mean to understand

community care as a spiritual practice? Might there be a way to revisit our understanding of older practices as fasting, Sabbath, and communal prayer in the context of suspending communion, handshaking, and worship? Might there be an opportunity to recenter the why of our gatherings, to examine the definition of community and how we manage it? For at heart, our mission hasn't changed.

We have good people at the helm of our communities up and down the presbytery. I laud you for asking the right questions, prioritizing the right concerns, and modeling leadership to a larger culture that still has need for the voice of the church. We unite in prayer for you, for your congregations, and for the world, of which we are so very much a part.

I now bless you with the final verse from "Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah." May it serve as a prayer:

*"When I tread the verge of Jordan,
Bid my anxious fears subside;
Death of death, and hell's destruction,
Land me safe on Canaan's side
Songs of praises, I will ever give to Thee;
Songs of praises, I will ever give to Thee."*

In Faith,

Rev. Ryan J. Landino, Lead Presbyter For Transformation, Great Rivers Presbytery

Valuable Links:

Center for Disease Control (CDC): Resources for Community- and Faith-Based Leaders
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html>

PCUSA resource guide: "Coronavirus: Faith, not fear, COVID-19 resources for churches and individuals"
<https://www.pcusa.org/covid19/?fbclid=IwAR11okoGuVvEAa2LGZ1NHQyg-R72q3vvygDXyw54LaqhAhMICrDoG5Ocjgk>

Press Release: "State of Illinois and City of Chicago Issue New Guidance to Minimize COVID-19 Spread"
3/12/20
<https://www2.illinois.gov/Pages/news-item.aspx?ReleaseID=21245>

Announcement: From the (PCUSA) Board of Pensions, announcing they will fully cover all fees related to COVID-19 testing for all plans. 3/12/20
<http://www.pensions.org/news-and-events/articles/coronavirus-message>

Pastoral Letter: From Rev. Susan Phillips to First Presbyterian Church of Springfield, 3/12/20
<https://www.facebook.com/119782384730010/posts/3680767248631488/>

Pastoral Letter: From Rev. James Benson to Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church in Rock Island, 3/12/20
https://www.goodshepherdpres.org/content.cfm?page_content=announcement_include.cfm&announcement_id=397&r=69761079

Pastoral Letter: From Rev. Matt Wilcox to First Presbyterian Church of Normal, 3/13/20

<https://www.csmedia1.com/firstpresnormal.org/coronavirus-notice.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2vwFknDabYbIN57qdkyvCLIEYv-OIMtuKw6EdPwFmwm07c9QeFtxnbQ4g>

Blog: COVID-19: “100 Ideas for Ministers and Ministry Leaders” 3/12/20 by Traci Smith

<http://www.traci-smith.com/covid-19-100-ideas-for-ministers-and-ministry-leaders/?fbclid=IwAR0S2mYsK6HkMfAsG0htbbxuCZYG3mwXHCpKG9rHV1meYgXDMjhAY3xcB4>

“A Pastoral Statement on the Coronavirus/COVID-19” From PC(USA) Office of Theology and Worship:

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/Coronavirus-Covid-19-Statement3.pdf>

Here are some health practices for consideration for worshipping communities that physically gather (from my phone conversations from officials from local county health departments on church spaces):

- Continue to wash hands thoroughly for twenty seconds, avoid touching your face, and self-isolate if displaying flu-like symptoms
- High risk populations not attend worship (elderly, and those with underlying health conditions with low resiliency to sickness, especially heart disease, lung disease, diabetes, and autoimmune compromised individuals)
- Wipe down contact with high-touch surfaces (handrails, door knobs, elevator buttons) before, during, and after worship. Be creative about different uses of common pens and offering plates.
- Spread out in worship to avoid close contact (maybe “redistribute weight like on an airplane”)
- Limit or avoid touch in displaying signs of peace and personal greetings (use bows, waves, nods, elbow signs, Vulcan greeting signs, etc.).
- Suspend communion by intinction and examine your communion practices.
- Continue food pantry ministries, but examine food distribution processes to avoid situations of lines and high foot traffic in food distribution centers.
- Check in on high-risk members of your community who are self-quarantining out of fear of engaging the community—the church might have a role in helping them secure groceries and regular medications.
- Speak out against stigmas and discrimination against persons of Asian descent, people who have traveled, and emergency responders or healthcare professionals (CDC has a page on this)
- Interestingly, Champaign Urbana Public Health District to the south of us has perhaps the most restrictive recommendations in place: in a 3/12/2020 video conference call with area faith groups, they recommended limiting in person gathering (limiting gatherings to 50 people or less and furthering limiting group size to 10 or less if the group includes people over age 60; have a preexisting health condition(s), or have an impaired immunity system).

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov