

March 20, 2020

Dear friends in Christ,

I want to take this opportunity in the form of a second communication to you regarding how we in Great Rivers Presbytery are continuing to collectively respond with faith, integrity, and wisdom to COVID-19, also known as the coronavirus. Like many of you, I am following the news closely, watching directives from our health authorities, and monitoring how fluid the situation is, even as conditions change day to day and hour to hour. The challenges you are facing are manifesting in a number of different ways, and so we continue to trust you that you are best suited to know how to lead your people through them and be a steadfast witness in your community. Right now, the Presbytery of Great Rivers is on standby to help out in any way that we can. If you are experiencing any kind of hardship, please let us know and we will walk with each other through it. If you are looking for locations that offer online worship, please see the Facebook page of Great Rivers Presbytery, where we will continue to share news and updates. As I have expressed before, I have so much gratitude for all of you doing ministry in these challenges.

At this time, the CDC is amplifying the White House's recommendations to not gather in groups of ten or more through the end of March. As an expression of taking as much precaution as possible, an overwhelming majority of the congregations of our presbytery have prayerfully decided to suspend in-person worship for the next two Sundays, if not for longer. As someone who cares deeply for you and the people of this presbytery, I share my relief at your discernment. Many of our Presbyterian churches have shown leadership being among the first congregations in our communities with nonhierarchical polities to take decisive action to slow the communal spread of the disease, and I commend you for the measures you have taken and are taking.

Even with the wide unavailability of testing, even for those displaying symptoms, at the time of this writing on Friday, March 20, the Illinois Department of Health confirms nine cases of person with COVID-19 within the geographic bounds of our presbytery (four in Sangamon County, three in Peoria County, and two in Woodford County). Three of the four largest urban centers of our presbytery, Peoria, Springfield, and the Quad Cities Area, all have confirmed cases. Two of our own pastors are cooperating with mandatory quarantine instructions, one due to a close family member having recently returned from overseas travel, and another having been in contact with a suspected case. Please do not treat this pandemic lightly. Not only are many of our church members in at-risk age groups, but I have spoken to several pastors who themselves or their closest loved ones have multiple compounding health complications that make them especially vulnerable to this disease. We can show great love and support by encouraging each other to understand the need to exercise physical distancing, and we strongly recommend all congregations to consider the suspension of in-person worship if you have not already.

Like many of you, I wish I had the right words to address all our concerns and questions, especially as we begin to foresee the possibility of entering the season of Easter without an all-clear from health authorities to gather again. I feel your tiredness, I sympathize with your weariness of receiving criticism and second guessing your own leadership, and I see the anxiety you carry by both new challenges and old challenges compounded. In case you need to hear it, know that you are not alone—you are leading your people better than you think you are.

On the one hand, what we are experiencing is unprecedented, particularly in our lifetime. On the other hand however, we as a people of God have been here before. When the temple was destroyed in 587 BCE and the holy place counted upon for divine worship was inaccessible, God SPOKE, and much of the Old Testament came into being through the prophets. When Apostle Paul was imprisoned and had nothing but a pen and a piece of paper with which to minister to his anxious people, God SPOKE, and some of most beloved Scriptures we have come into the New Testament canon. This is to say my friends, even as services are suspended, worship is not “cancelled” in any way—God is speaking more powerfully through your phone call check-ins and text messages, through email devotions and impromptu live streams, than perhaps ever before. If there were ever a time we needed your witness that God still speaks, it is now. We need the faith to remind us *“who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Romans 8:35,38-39). Some things are definitely changing: the way we gather, how we connect; but at the same time, some things will never change—our mission to love God and love our neighbor, and the opportunity we have to do this is now.

Because of a divine wisdom we can only speak to but never fully understand, God put US in this particular place in this particular time. And for that I thank God, because I can tell you what I am seeing up and down our presbytery;

- I see needs reassessed and ministry efforts reprioritized, mission reclaimed and the community’s vulnerable recentered.
- I see greater attention to self-care, both personal and communal, naming what we “can do” and what we “cannot do,” and then acting from there.
- I see new technologies implemented like Zoom, smartphones, YouTube, and Facebook live, but also “low tech” technologies reengaged for ministry: phone calls, shared scripts, text messages, cards, and letter mailings.
- I see a renewed energy in checking in on each other for its own sake, substantive phone calls and prayer given on the spot.

- I see movements towards teamwork and listening and grassroots buy-in before decisions are made together on a level not seen mobilized in a long time.
- I see experimentation, failure, outpourings of grace, humble learning, trying again—and coming out completely different on the other side.
- I see a forced spiritual fast from rituals that may have gotten stale but are now dearly beloved again, and a chance to cast away less meaningful routines.
- I see a whole new reading on long familiar Scriptures, new lenses on faith, on exile, on healing, on restoration.
- I see carte blanche to try something new—to BE something new.
- I see people BEING CHURCH, beyond, in-spite of, and independent of any building.

Because the majority of you know for sure your action plan you are taking for the next ten days, this is a great opportunity to declare a SEASON OF GRACE for each other, and especially for yourselves. We can try something new, anticipate failure, and see what we can learn. Be kindly reminded of the truth that such fasting, Sabbath, disruption, and change is happening during the season of Lent is *theological gold*. What an amazing opportunity to frame our work in the context of the spiritual practices of Lent, in which we traditionally “give something up” not so we can lose it, but that we can come to value it again!

Yes, there is chance these changes may go longer than we are ready for, and new challenges will emerge we did not foresee. Yes, there is a chance that Easter for your congregation will need to be whatever day or month we are advised to emerge out of physical isolation (If we do, let it be the greatest Easter celebration we have ever sung out our hearts for.) Let us remember God moves with us with fire and cloud and has already given us everything we need right here in our midst. Even after manna from heaven poured abundantly from the sky, that manna burned off at the end of the day so we would trust God to provide tomorrow. For even Jesus tells us, “*Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today*” (Matthew 6:34).

For now, I pray with and for you. I breathe with you. And I take one day at a time with you. Please know you are not alone. I leave you now with this charge from Joshua 1:9: “*I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.*”

In Faith,

Rev. Ryan J. Landino, Lead Presbyter For Transformation, Great Rivers Presbytery, in consultation with Rev. Elissa Bailey, Stated Clerk, Great Rivers Presbytery

VALUABLE LINKS (UPDATED LIST)

Center for Disease Control (CDC) on Coronavirus
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.htm>
(where you can find updates on the disease)

“Coronavirus/COVID-19 Resources for Congregations and Members” link
<https://www.pcusa.org/covid19/>
(A new, updated resource list based on emerging needs for congregations)

“Church in an Emergency/Pandemic” — Advisory opinion from the Office of the General Assembly
[https://oga.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/final_edited_advisory_opinion_church_in_an_emergency_or_pandemic_\(002\).pdf](https://oga.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/final_edited_advisory_opinion_church_in_an_emergency_or_pandemic_(002).pdf)
(This document looks at technical aspects of virtual business of holding church meetings electronically)

“20 Questions to Help with COVID-19 Anxiety” by Kathleen Smith
https://theanxiousoverachiever.substack.com/p/20-questions-to-help-with-covid-19?utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=email&utm_source=facebook&fbclid=IwAR3dY9RDUKxopMrS_tzO3A9ip2oSmhieYhitsILpfSCGSfPo00AMhRVqUc8
(A great list of questions to help you gauge whether you have done enough and ascertain what you can or cannot control)

“How to Facebook Live (for any size church)” video
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aNclFnx67ys&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1XAJh3z9P12gZT3FWhTiN_RtMAbLItoP07234xQHylmVoTJZPWqOXcxVM
(A video tutorial showing you how to set up livestreaming through Facebook live for worship)

“Tips and Tricks for Creating Community on Zoom”
https://docs.google.com/document/d/13gelvJjto135PEzlqc_jR6rWllc7OB4P5YSeBekQW8l/edit?fbclid=IwAR0NuulzxGG7xluruHpA8RMXXc6Uwjxsp8zGW-TqNWJPz9Lsv01ppYpV-So
(A document of best practices for Zoom, h/t Susan Phillips)

Music Recording Resources:
<https://www.smallchurchmusic.com/>
<https://hymnary.org/>

Guidelines and Rules on Honoring Copyright
<https://www.pcusa.org/copyright/>