

March 13, 2020

Dear friends,

As more information – and more guidance, well-intended and of varying quality – comes in about the current viral outbreak known as COVID-19, I wanted to reach out and share some thoughts about Sunday worship, contagion and our life together as a community of faith.

We have already suspended passing the peace at this time and we will not share communion at the moment. We will use a revised method when we choose to share it again. We have hand-sanitizer at the back of the church for use during worship and more downstairs in the lower hall. We have also made the step of temporarily removing every other chair in our worship space to allow people more space between one another for everyone's safety.

The best medical guidance about avoiding infection and preventing further spread is to pay attention to hand hygiene, to maintain social distance and, if necessary, to self-isolate. With these approaches, the pandemic will be slowed enough that the medical system will be able to cope with identified cases and the rest of us will be as safe as possible. As your minister, I can't tell you what "social distance" means for you; sometimes the need for connection and togetherness takes precedence. Sometimes connection involves being in close company and sometimes connection takes place in other ways. As usual, the recommendation is to stay home if you are ill with an infection (cold, flu, gastrointestinal) and let me or any member of our church board know how we can support you.

I can't do what some members of other churches, and even government officials, have urged ministers to do, telling people to stay home until the crisis has passed. In historical times of plague and outbreak, Christians and churches have braved the risk of infection in order to continue showing compassion and solidarity with the most outcast and downtrodden. Only your personal faith and concern can tell you whether staying home is the right thing to do, or whether continuing to show hospitality and loving-kindness in the face of human vulnerability is worth the risk involved. I do think the worst thing we could do would be to retreat behind our individual resources while leaving those without such resources abandoned and vulnerable.

The best guidance we've received from church authorities is to "be cautious and stay connected". Neither of these priorities can faithfully be pursued without reference to the other. To that end, unless you know you've directly encountered someone who is currently quarantined, you have a combination of fever with cough or breathing troubles, or you belong to a particularly vulnerable demographic, I encourage you to continue to participate in the life of the church and in our broader community in whichever way you see fit. I am paying extra careful attention to my own hand hygiene. You may also see some precautions put in place for receiving and counting the offering, meeting style and coordination and sharing refreshments after church.

We also hope to resurrect a telephone tree protocol so that we can stay connected and check in with one another to provide support for one another in this challenging time. Jesus consistently closed the "social distance" between himself and the ill. None of us individually are Jesus, and it is both prudent and reasonable as individuals to take precautions against the spread of disease. But it is just as true that collectively we must seek to embrace those most in need in whatever way we can manage. As this situation continues, further changes may well be forthcoming.

Wishing you peace and strength,

*Laura*