



WISCONSIN COUNCIL
OF CHURCHES
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To: Wisconsin Judiciary Leaders / Religious Leaders
From: Rev. Kerri Parker, WCC Executive Director
Date: April 25, 2020
Re: Preparing Clergy (and churches) for what to expect as the pandemic continues

The Wisconsin Council of Churches has substantially reoriented its work towards supporting clergy and churches in ministry through the COVID-19 pandemic. Council staff has worked with state emergency management officials, the Department of Health Services, and public health experts to ensure that we have accurate, up-to-date information. We have consulted with other ecumenical organizations and clergy around the country regarding emerging best practices and adaptive ministry that makes best use of the tools available to religious leaders during this time of social distancing and substantial health risks.

We are here to help you equip your clergy for major upheaval in church and society in the coming months. Here's what we've already done, and here's some of what we're prepared to do:

In addition to a section of our website dedicated to solid resources we have curated from others, this research and consultation has allowed us to develop the following resources in-house:

- Flu Season, Coronavirus, and the Church
- Preparing for 'Safer at Home'
- 10 Best Practices for Remote Worship and Devotions
- Funerals and Burials During COVID-19 (adapted)
- What is my Pastor Doing (now that they're not at church)?
- On Ministry Choices and the Commandment to Love
- Returning to Church (a phased set of recommendations aligned with the Badger Bounce Back)

Many of these have arisen from grassroots requests from clergy around the state, or urgent needs of the moment, as the situation on the ground has changed rapidly. We are offering two weekly clergy check-ins, and also consult one on one as your clergy reach out to us. I've been dropping in to visit several online worship services on Sunday, and where I can, I try to leave a comment of prayer, blessing, and Christian kinship.

I write this note to you as the churches of Wisconsin are at a pivotal moment. Some clergy are under tremendous pressure from the laity to reopen, or to develop reopening plans. The sense one gets from public messaging is one of uncertainty regarding how long this will all last, as social distancing seems to be working to keep our overall numbers low, the depth of the crisis is not apparent to average residents of Wisconsin who are not exposed to scenes at the hospital or someone who is ill, and there is dissension between the branches of Wisconsin's government.

It is clear to us from our work with the public health community that we are looking at months until we can go back to church in any reasonable size gathering. Even then, any of the activities that are typical to churches will not be feasible or safe: singing together, offering physical greetings of peace, sharing food (including the Eucharist and fellowship time), being close in the pews to feel like one community. We will be wearing face masks in public. Any return to the physical building will continue to leave out many parishioners who are higher risk – a substantial portion of the body. This will necessarily continue until there is a vaccine, produced in sufficient quantity for the general population.

These hard truths are not widely understood. We believe it is essential to help the clergy understand them in a careful way, but quickly. For the sake of the future of the church, and the good care of our parishioners, we need to come to terms with this.

As a WCC staff team, we have already been working with clergy on a one to one basis regarding this information. We're glad to do so. Our capacity is limited, however – there are only so many one on one calls we can handle given our staff size. Many of the questions are the same. We believe it is much more effective to do this in clergy clusters so there is a chance to ask questions pertinent to denominational practice and reflect together.

With that in mind, we developed a set of “Returning to Church” recommendations and now have a presentation to offer your clergy groups.

Would you invite Council staff to clergy gatherings in the upcoming weeks so we can assist you and your clergy in the process of understanding the depth and breadth this new, long term church reality?

Having offered this presentation more than once now, the shape of it is generally:

- About 15-20 minutes of presentation on what we've learned about the likely shape of the year to come and the phases of the Badger Bounce Back. A core piece of this teaching is the extended nature of the recovery. We can anticipate months, not weeks – and a nonlinear recovery, with sequences of loosening and tightening physical distancing, with additional waves of illness anticipated.
- About 20 minutes about realities of returning to church, and implications for adapting church practices. This is grounded in the “Returning to Church” document recently released by the Council. It explains the ‘why’ of several of the recommendations.
- Time for questions and discussion.
- We do offer a couple of recommended articles and there is an optional 4-minute video that can be included to help clergy think about ministry in these times.

My experience is that this is a lot for people to absorb. There are serious implications for the future of the church. This can be a lot, particularly for small church pastors. Their churches will be in a precarious place in this time to come. Your clergy will need followup care. We do not believe, however, that there is any benefit to delaying this conversation among those who need to be community leaders in a time of crisis.

When you are ready to schedule a time for me to visit with your clergy, you can reach me at execdir@wichurches.org, or 608-290-6113.