

'Being the Church' During the Pandemic

The Wired Word for the Week of March 22, 2020

In the News

When we at *The Wired Word* started talking about possible topics for this week's lesson, there was no question that even though we've already provided two lessons related to the coronavirus crisis (the first lesson for the February 16 TWW installment and the second lesson for the March 8 installment), that we needed to address it again this week.

So we decided to write about how churches are responding to the efforts to slow the spread of the disease. That decision was made just three days before writing this lesson (on Tuesday).

But what we didn't realize at the time was how fast some of what churches decided to do would need to be revised as the governments of our states and our nation issued new guidelines and imposed new restrictions that had seemed almost unthinkable just days earlier.

What happened in the Episcopal Diocese of Albany (New York) is an example of how fast decisions about how the church should respond have had to be rethought. In an email message sent on March 13, Bishop William H. Love, the diocesan leader, informed the clergy and laypeople of the diocese that while "a few" other dioceses had decided to cancel all their Sunday services, he had chosen not to do that, at least not yet.

Instead, he issued instructions to minimize person-to-person contact during worship services. One concerned changes in how communion should be served. "The wine consecrated at Holy Communion will be consumed by the celebrant only," the bishop said, rather than by each worshiper from a common cup, which is standard Episcopal practice. Communion was to be administered from the aisle, not the altar rail "to do away with the need for multiple people touching the altar rail one after another while kneeling side by side," the bishop said.

But just four days later, Bishop Love sent a second email message, stating that due to new guidelines from President Trump to avoid gatherings of 10 or more people, he was suspending all regular Sunday and weekday services through the end of March.

That suspension is to apply even to funerals, which are to be limited in attendance to immediate family members. The bishop recommended that a larger memorial service honoring the life of the departed member be scheduled once the suspension is lifted.

It seems likely that given the guidelines from the White House, many other churches, as well as houses of worship from other religions, will make similar decisions before this Sunday or the day they would normally gather for worship.

Part of the difficulty is that the guidelines for minimizing the health risk from the coronavirus continue to evolve. Pastor Linda Stephan of Williamston United Methodist Church in Williamston, Michigan, recently proposed a hybrid service where healthy members could attend in person, and others could attend via a livestream.

But already that plan has been scuttled. She has now arranged to stream her sermon on Facebook Live. Stephan is certain that for a church, "gathering matters," but she understands that these are not ordinary times.

She also sees the importance of her role as a faith leader in this crisis, which is unprecedented in lifetimes of people today.

"I am also grateful that I'm in the place that I'm at, and hopefully [will] be a calming presence to my people and also a bold leader, and to make some good decisions, not just for my church community, but for everyone," Stephan said.

Lest we increase fear, we should also report some "good news" about the disease itself. The first epidemiological studies are beginning to be published. One study preprint (see the "Estimating the Infection and Case Fatality ..." link in the list below) was of the cruise ship *Diamond Princess*, where over 3,700 passengers and crew were exposed to the coronavirus in Hong Kong prior to sailing to Yokohama. During most of the voyage, things proceeded with normal social interactions in a confined space. There was no isolation (confining a diseased person) or quarantine (restricting those known to be exposed).

Once in Japan, the ship was quarantined for 14 days and approximately 3,100 of those on board were tested for the virus. Although conditions were favorable for the spread of the disease prior to knowledge of it onboard, only 17 percent tested positive -- and over half of those showed

no symptoms. Seven people died, six of the 1,015 passengers aged 70-79 and one of the 216 aged 80-89. Although this is a small sample, this indicates that the quarantine and restrictions currently in effect are likely to greatly reduce the spread of the disease and, as long as the rates remain low and medical facilities are not overwhelmed, almost everyone who contracts the disease will survive. As some people have noted, we should be concerned and careful, but not fearful or hysterical.

The calming-presence role for religious leaders that Stephan mentioned cannot be overstated. Nor should their role as Bible teachers and Christian theologians. The Bible and Christian theology provide a solid rock on which to stand during difficult times.

God is with us.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Faith Leaders Talk About Guiding Congregants Through COVID-19 and Uncertain Times. *Michigan Radio*](#)

[Should Your Church Stop Meeting to Slow COVID-19? How 3 Seattle Churches Decided. *Christianity Today*](#)

[Estimating the Infection and Case Fatality Ratio For COVID-19 Using Age-Adjusted Data From the Outbreak on the Diamond Princess Cruise Ship. *medRxiv*](#)

The Big Questions

1. What measures, if any, have you personally taken to protect yourself and your family during this pandemic? If there are recommended measures you've chosen not to take, why?
2. What are some possible good side effects that might come from temporary "social distancing"? How might temporary social distancing contribute to your spiritual life?
3. Does gathering actually matter to the church? Explain your answer. What might enforced forgoing of gathering together teach the church?
4. In what ways, if at all, do scripture and Christian theology help you deal with uncertain times?
5. What is the opposite of "uncertain times"? (Answer this question in the context of your appointment calendar.)

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

James 4:13-15

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money." Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that." (No context needed.)

"Uncertain times."

We're starting to hear that term a lot these days when no one can accurately predict how long our world will be dealing with the coronavirus pandemic.

In a way, "uncertain times" is an odd term, since in reality all times are uncertain, as James reminds us in the verses above.

Questions: What role ought planning for the future have in a Christian's approach to life? What or who might be overlooked because of future planning? What or who that might have been overlooked be included because of future planning? How do your appointment calendar and happenstance intersect? How do your appointment calendar and God's will intersect?

Hebrews 10:24-25

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (For context, read 10:23-25.)

Perhaps one of the reasons "social distancing" is a challenge for churches (and for many others) is that it makes the act of "encouraging one another" more difficult. Of course, even from a distance, we can send email and Facebook messages and texts, as well as make phone calls of encouragement (or of friendship or of support, etc.). But there is something that being physically present with others for whom faith in Christ is important is not so easily replaced from a distance.

What's more, the Bible often represents people in forced social isolation as "cut off" from the temple or family or fellowship (see, for example, Leviticus 13:45-46; Psalm 38:11; Numbers 12:10-15; Luke 17:12). On the other hand, one way salvation is sometimes characterized is as God

or Jesus bridging the distance to those in social isolation (see Jeremiah 23:23; Luke 15:20; 17:12-14; 18:13-14; Ephesians 2:13).

This week, the United Methodist bishop of New Jersey listed these reasons why churches ought to willingly accept not gathering during the current crisis:

- We want to take every means possible to protect people's health and stop the spread of the coronavirus. The sooner we all work together to stamp out the virus, the sooner life gets back to normal.
- Governmental officials, including the president, have said there are not to be gatherings of 10 or more people.
- While your town may not be affected yet, we want to be in solidarity with our sister congregations that are in affected areas.
- We want to be a witness and example of what are appropriate behaviors and practices during a pandemic.
- For all of those who are sick or who have died, we want to honor them through our actions.
- The number of reported cases in the United States grew by over 25 percent overnight. This is a serious health pandemic, and the church should be part of the solution.

Questions: What do you feel you are missing by not gathering with your fellow Christians at church right now? How is God speaking to you right now, and what is he saying?

Psalm 91:4-6 (NIV)

*[God] will cover you with his feathers,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.
You will not fear the terror of night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,
nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,
nor the plague that destroys at midday.*

(For context, read 91:1-16.)

Psalm 91 is about trust and confidence in God. It speaks of unqualified protection for the righteous, which is probably why it is popular among those engaged in perilous undertakings, including those going onto battlefields.

Note here what the psalm says about "the pestilence that stalks in the darkness," and "the plague that destroys at midday."

Questions: It's likely that with a disease this widespread, at least some of those who have died were followers of Jesus. In what ways should Christians hear these lines about pestilence and plague today?

Psalm 46:1-2

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea ... (For context, read 46:1-11.)

Hebrews 12:28

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe ... (For context, read 12:25-29.)

A lot more than the metaphorical mountains of Psalm 46 has been shaken up by the global pandemic we are facing. We have experienced a shaking that is felt into our very roots. The assumption that plagues and the like only happen in countries lacking in up-to-date sanitary controls and the latest in medical services has been jolted out of us. Confidence in world, national and state health services has crumbled. Gone are the days when all we had to fear was fear itself. We are being shaken to the core.

We now know this: No human defense is certain, and no human life can be guaranteed by any agency of earth. Only God is unshakeable and the only unshakeable place is the kingdom of God itself. The writer of Hebrews says as much: "Therefore ... we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken."

But the problem is, while we who are people of faith can assent to that on a "spiritual" level, in the nitty-gritty of our lives -- that place where we reside most of the time -- that affirmation doesn't connect very well. Yes, we who follow Christ are citizens of both an eternal kingdom and an earthly nation, but what, in any terms that help us now, does that dual citizenship really mean?

The people of the Old Testament had to struggle to understand that as well, and one place we see it is in Psalm 46. The psalm sings about the city of God (Jerusalem) as though it were absolutely untouchable: "though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the

heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. ... God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved" (vv 2-3, 5).

However, Jerusalem did eventually fall, specifically to the army of the Babylonians.

What the people of ancient Jerusalem missed is that while God was in the midst of the city, he called them to trust not a place but a Presence. The true city of God is within us, and our ultimate confidence is in the holy Presence in that "place."

Questions: What inside you feels "shaken" by the global pandemic? What inside you feels "solid" despite the global pandemic? In what ways *for you* is God "a very present help in trouble"? What, if anything, keeps you from affirming that?

For Further Discussion

1. Respond to these quotes from a blog entry titled ["10 Guidelines for Pastoral Care During the Coronavirus Outbreak"](#) by Eileen R. Campbell-Reed. Though written for pastors, its advice can apply to the church as a whole, so in your response, mention how you personally might put these ideas to work in your congregation:

- Show up for people, even if it's not in person. "Avoid close contact" is becoming a mantra in this crisis, especially for people over 60. Some groups of people will experience social stigma around the disease. In this age, we can show up for people digitally. It is not the same as being able to reach out and hold a hand. Yet we are fortunate to have this viable option. You are likely already connected to people on various social platforms, so use them -- with care -- to offer your support.
- Listen in love. No matter what turn a crisis takes, one of the most enduring and powerful gifts we can offer is to listen. By listening we embody the love of the sacred, the love of a wider community, the love of life itself. Compassionate listening is exactly what people need when they are faced with the overwhelming, uncontrollable circumstances of a crisis.
- Keep values alive. Hospice workers and chaplains often say that people die the way they lived. And while not every crisis will be a deadly one, we are all going to die. In frightening times, our job is

to call on people to live into their best sense of how to be in the world. This does not mean being dishonest about a crisis and its threats. It does mean we keep leaning into God's sustaining presence, loving our neighbors, and facing death with the same purpose and values by which we faced life.

2. Read this, from TWW team consultant James Gruetzner: A few years ago, our moderate-sized (Sunday attendance about 200) congregation began to webcast one of its Sunday morning services. Although we had continued services [during the initial responses to the coronavirus] -- advising people to worship via the Internet if they were older or symptomatic, and taking precautions to avoid interpersonal spread of pathogens, Tuesday evening, following the president's recommendation to limit gatherings to 10 people, we decided to go to webcast-only for our Lenten (Wednesday night) and Sunday morning services. (Services are both live-streamed and available for later use.) We are arranging to have ten people total (including pastor) to provide for hymn singing and liturgy responses. We'll see how this works out. See [Christ Lutheran Church and School, Sermons & Worship Services](#).

It will be a challenge to make payroll. During the offering time we will not only show how to give electronically (which our family had been doing for over a decade), we will encourage people who are members of other congregations to continue their regular donations to their own.

3. Comment on this: One thing James Gruetzner noticed while people were still attending services during the early responses to the virus spread: "Despite encouragement from our pastor for people to maintain their 'anti-social distance' (terminology popular at work, not used by him), people seemed to prefer to sit close to each other anyway."

4. Respond to this article about [an outcome from the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918](#), written by TWW team member Frank Ramirez.

Responding to the News

Check out "[Coronavirus Resources for the Church](#)." (Our thanks to TWW subscriber Craig Schmidt, pastor of Bethel Lutheran Brethren Church in Antler, North Dakota, for pointing us to this resource.)

Review these ["7 Lessons from Singapore's Churches for When the Coronavirus Reaches Yours"](#) and consider which ones you can apply to your church.

Learn from the excellent advice [here](#) from a man who worked for the World Health Organization during the SARS epidemic in China.

Familiarize yourself with the [advice from the Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#) regarding how to protect yourself from the coronavirus.

See what you can do to relieve your worries while still protecting yourself and your family: [Don't Go Down a Coronavirus Anxiety Spiral](#).

Be inspired by viewing this: ["We Are Not Alone" by Pepper Choplin at Sandy Ridge Mennonite](#) or this: [We Are Not Alone](#).

Prayer

Strengthen, O Lord, all who are on the medical front lines against the coronavirus. Enable those in authority to make good and timely decisions about matters related to the virus. Help us all to do what we can to slow the spread of the disease. Empower the church to "be the church" in creative, calm, compassionate ways. And bring this pandemic to a swift end so that lives are spared. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.