

March 13, 2020

An open letter to religious leaders and faith communities:

I write to you as a concerned citizen and friend, and as a social epidemiologist. My job, at the University of Pennsylvania's Perelman School of Medicine, is to study and teach the social causes and consequences of epidemics. My goal in this letter is to prompt action to reduce human suffering. I am also writing to support you at a time when many people are undoubtedly seeking your guidance and solace.

The coming days will be painful for many people we know and love. Given the momentum of the COVID19 epidemic in the US, our country is entering a period of crisis, which will reverberate through our communities and health care systems. Public health professionals fully expect "case counts" to escalate rapidly in the coming days, especially as increased testing reveals ongoing community transmission of the virus that causes COVID19. That which has been largely invisible will become unignorable.

In the coming days and weeks, our hospitals will strain to care for the sick, and many people will die. We should look to Italy's current crisis as a dire warning to our nation. Their health system is not so different from our own, and their epidemic is just days ahead of ours. In the past 24 hours in Italy, a nation of 60 million people, there were 368 COVID19 deaths. Health care workers there are facing the most challenging ethical dilemmas and most excruciating physical labor that any person could possibly endure. They are at risk of becoming sick, and of dying. These are my beloved colleagues, and I'm moved to write on their behalf, as they fortify themselves for the days ahead.

We have the power to curb the unfolding disaster and to save lives, but we must act now, without a moment's delay.

As concerned human beings, we must engage in active social distancing now--strictly limiting our face-to-face contacts. Our goal is to deprive the virus of its next susceptible host. Currently, this strategy is one of the few available tools to slow COVID19, given that we have neither a vaccine nor an effective treatment. My public health colleagues and I urge individuals and organizations to make hard changes **immediately**. In the community, social distancing means: no parties, no play dates, no leisure travel. Work remotely whenever possible. Stay home with your family.

What does this mean for faith communities?

Our houses of worship--our sanctuaries--are also ideal sites for the spread of this deadly disease. It is a horrible irony that viruses thrive in community. When we kneel together, break bread together, sing together, mourn together, celebrate together--all are opportunities for us to get sick together, too. This has been evident in South Korea, where a surge in cases was linked to a religious community. Closer to home, Georgetown is on alert after a rector in a 550-member congregation fell ill with COVID19. In New York, 108 confirmed cases have thus far been identified in New Rochelle, with a temple at the center of the outbreak. The same rules apply in secular settings. One conference in Massachusetts gave rise to 77 of 95 cases detected in the state as of March 11th. A single gathering can thrust an entire state or nation into an emergency.

Our faith communities must engage actively, vigorously, in social distancing measures now. We all must limit our in-person social contacts. This is especially important to protect the populations at elevated risk of adverse COVID19 outcomes: the elderly, people with chronic illnesses, and people who are obese. Even people who are not in these defined “high risk” groups have an important role to play. Young people, too, are susceptible to infection, and their actions can either accelerate or slow the destruction caused by the epidemic.

I urge you to work together, putting faith in action for the health of our nation and our world. **Congregations can contribute mightily to slowing this epidemic by suspending all collective in-person worship now.** We must not wait for mandates from our elected officials.

Please encourage your members to pray and observe only with their immediate family members, in their own homes. Understanding that religious law and tradition may lead you in another direction, I ask you to join together, across faith traditions, in a collective action **to save lives.** We must reshape the contours of worship for this new and difficult day.

Every single infection prevented will prevent countless others, and will save lives. These steps we take, to rigorously limit our face-to-face contacts in the community, will also free up beds in our hospitals, so that the sick and the dying can receive adequate attention and care. Please use your collective voice, as people of faith, to share this urgent and under-appreciated message. We must not delay another day. We all have the power to save lives, and we can do it by praying in place.

In fellowship,

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Assumptions at the time of writing: 1) COVID19 is a deadly disease; 2) the virus that causes COVID19 is readily transmitted person-to-person; 3) people who are asymptomatic may be able to transmit the virus; 4) COVID19 is far more widespread in the US than official case counts suggest, due to severe limitations in testing.