



## *The Episcopal Diocese of Western North Carolina*

March 11, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sister in Christ,

I write to you today to provide an update of [my last communication to you of February 29](#) in response to the coronavirus / COVID-19 situation. Please know that the safety and good health of all people, both the members of our churches and those in our wider communities, is of the utmost importance.

Yesterday, the House of Bishops received a briefing from an infectious disease expert. In addition to this briefing, I have continued to closely follow the recommendations provided by [Episcopal Relief and Development](#) as well as the [North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services](#) and the [Centers for Disease Control](#). These resources provide sound insights and recommendations to keep ourselves and our communities healthy and well.

Also yesterday, Governor Roy Cooper declared a [state of emergency](#) for North Carolina in response to the recent spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) within state borders. It sounds scary, but a state of emergency actually is intended “to enable government officials to take extra measures to protect the public.” We have been in this situation before, most notably following the hurricanes of recent years. During his press briefing, the governor did specifically mention that those in high-risk groups – such as the elderly and those with health issues – consider avoiding large gatherings, including sporting events and yes, church.

As such I am urging you and your leadership to not only [review my earlier communication](#) but to also seriously consider implementing the following:

1. Social Distancing: One of the prevailing realities is that this virus is transmitted in a similar process to the way influenza and other respiratory pathogens spread: primarily through person-to-person contact when an infected individual coughs or sneezes and respiratory droplets are in the air or accumulate on surfaces. The single best way to mitigate exposure to this virus is to self-practice social distancing and thoughtfully consider one’s participation in large gatherings, including any form of worship or other church related formation and fellowship events.
2. Self-monitor: Be aware of how you are feeling, and be honest with yourself if you are feeling symptoms. If symptoms develop, stay home and take care of yourself. This is not a time to be a hero or “power through.” The kindest thing you can do for yourself and everyone around you is to take care of yourself. It is OK to give yourself permission to stay home if you are feeling sick. Equally, urge your parishioners to STAY HOME if they have a fever and any respiratory symptoms, are suffering from any illness, have a weak immune system, or are elderly and to not venture out to church gatherings. For clergy facing illness, please contact me as soon as possible.

3. Stay connected: Find alternate ways to include those who may need to stay away from group situations. Perhaps you can livestream worship services on Facebook Live, or hold a special prayer service in that same forum. Put phone lists into practice – enlist the help of others to call those unable to attend services, either to check in, pray together or simply to let those who cannot come to church know they are remembered.
  
4. Worship Modifications: While some Bishops, out of an abundance of caution for their particular diocesan context, are issuing Pastoral Directives to all their clergy with clear instructions on how and when to conduct worship and fellowship, I believe you know your community best and I trust you to determine how to faithfully serve and pastor your congregations. ***At this time, and with the information that I have received from others whom I respect, I am not convinced that we need to take such actions in this diocese. I will continue to monitor and should circumstances change in Western North Carolina, such decisions will be reconsidered. In the meantime, I strongly encourage each of you to continue reviewing the suggested protocols provided by ERD and the CDC.*** Again, here are some of my recommendations:
  - a) I urge you to remind people to regularly wash their hands and to not touch their face.
  
  - b) ***I request that all parishes stop the practice of intinction until further notice.*** Most scientific studies reveal that the common cup, properly administered (the chalice is silver or silver-plate; wine is used, especially port, which has a higher alcohol content; and the chalice is wiped and rotated between receiving communicants), is safer than intinction. Again, I trust clergy to work with their lay leadership to identify the best practices that work for their congregations regarding Holy Communion, including whether to continue offering the Common Cup.
  
  - c) I urge you to continue teaching your parishioners that receiving the sacrament in one kind has ancient precedent in our spiritual life. We believe that those who receive only the bread (or wine) have fully received.
  
  - d) I urge you to exchange the Peace with a warm smile, a verbal gesture, and a nod. Refrain from any physical contact.
  
  - e) I urge you to refrain from passing the plate from hand to hand, and instead have your ushers hold onto the plate, making sure anyone who wants to put an offering in is able.
  
  - f) I urge you to drain all baptismal fonts of standing holy water and return it to the earth.
  
  - g) I urge you to provide plentiful access to hand sanitizer at every entrance to your worship space, and your property.
  
  - h) I urge you to work with your Lay Eucharistic Visitors in reviewing all practices that help safe-guard the health of both the visitor and the parishioner.

5. Join the conversation:

Episcopal Relief & Development invites you to a webinar conversation this Friday, March 13, 2020, 3:00 PM EST to talk about how we can maintain safety and serve the needs of vulnerable populations. Beyond the medical concerns related to COVID-19, there are significant economic impacts to low-wage workers, the food insecure, elders and other marginalized and vulnerable populations. While we encourage everyone staying safe, how do we do this while continuing to walk with our neighbors? [Registration required; follow this link to register.](#) If you have questions or concerns, please contact [usdisaster@episcopalrelief.org](mailto:usdisaster@episcopalrelief.org).

Finally, I want to end by sharing from Presiding Bishop Michael Curry's reflection to the House of Bishops and the Church,

“We are part of the human family of God. Jesus came to show us that his way of love is the way of life. It's God's human family. We are in a time when remembering that may be important for all of us. We are in this together. What affects some directly affects all indirectly. We are part of a family. The human family of God. So look out for your neighbors, look out for each other. Look out for yourselves. Listen to those who have knowledge that can help to guide us medically and help to guide us socially. Do everything that we can to do this together, to respond to each other's needs and to respond to our own needs. Walk together children, don't get weary, because there's a great camp meeting in the promised land.”

Just as situations like this require us to care for our physical well-being, these times also call us to nurture our prayer life. I invite you to join me in praying especially for the sick and the shut-in, those those infected by this virus, those who have died from this virus, the homeless, those filled with anxiety, and for all who are caring for those who are ill.

Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "José", with a small cross symbol to the left of the first letter.

Bishop José