

Dear Northminster Family,

This past week has been surreal. A disease that was once a headline from a far away land has reached our shores and has begun propagating into Ohio. What followed has been a cascading list of closures and restrictions, a delayed election, falling stock prices, and frenzied runs on toilet paper. It's as if we awoke inside some crazy Hollywood movie, and reminds me of Mark 4:35-41. Panicked disciples, fearing for their lives while on a boat in the middle of a storm, woke a sleeping Jesus who calmed the waves and then asked them "Why are you so afraid? Have you no faith?"

At our Session meeting Monday night, we had a very thoughtful conversation regarding what actions the church should take in response to the current situation - a long list of difficult questions that would have seemed unthinkable just one month ago.

Do we keep the church building open?

Will people keep coming?

If someone infected were inside, what would we need to clean, how would we need to do it, and who would do it?

Do we close the building instead? If so, how long?

What about the various self-help groups who meet here?

What about Easter?

What about Communion?

What about funerals, should that happen?

Pause for a moment and consider how you would answer.

Personally, I long for the days when our toughest debates centered around whether white wine is acceptable for a wedding communion, should we cut down a small tree to appease a neighbor, or what color shingles to put on the roof. Ultimately my decision came down to just one question: Given all the unknowns, how do we best protect the health of our congregation, guests, staff, and the community they interact with? There may be some who disagree with that decision, perhaps adamantly. I welcome any such criticism. I also suggest you step forward when the nominating committee looks to fill my expiring term at the end of the year.

In the hours and days since our meeting, new guidelines from the federal and state government support our choices, and other churches have arrived at the same conclusions. In two recent reports from the NY Times and the Imperial College, models indicate that the worse is yet to come, measures taken now could greatly reduce the severity, and yet it could be weeks or months until we return to our current levels. However, these models are constantly evolving as we gain new data about the disease, and it is far too easy to get caught up in all of the media coverage. Coronavirus is not Ebola, and only a fraction of people who contract it will face complications. The measures we all take are in the interest of those most vulnerable. I highly recommend watching the governor's daily press briefings, as the Ohio department of health director very clearly explains the facts as they become available.

Although we have closed the church building, we have not closed the church! Last week Pastor Rich, with the technological wizardry of Gordy East, put together a very well-done online video stream. Simply follow the link from the church website to watch any time. Plans are to include additional elements from our traditional service.

Also, just because we are being asked to distance ourselves, this does not mean we need be isolated. We can still phone, videochat, play words-with-friends or online card games with one another. As the weather warms, we can still head outside for some fresh air, tinker in the yard, or go for a walk. Take-out is still an option for many restaurants, as is food delivery services such as DoorDash.

In Exodus Chapter 11, the Israelite slaves in Egypt marked their doors with lambs blood and sheltered in place as a devastating force swept through the nation and took the lives of the firstborn of many households. Like them, we have been given advanced notice and told how to protect ourselves. As then, this too shall pass with time and we will be able to congregate again in person. Until then, please be extra cautious and continue to pray for one another, our community, state, nation, leaders, and medical personnel.

Dennis Yoder

New York Times Article

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/03/13/opinion/coronavirus-trump-response.html>

Imperial College Article

<https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/medicine/sph/ide/gida-fellowships/Imperial-College-COVID19-NPI-modelling-16-03-2020.pdf>

Ohio Governor's Press Briefings

<https://ohiochannel.org/collections/governor-mike-dewine>