

Finding Wisdom during a Pandemic

Adapting at St. Michael's to the Reality of Covid-19

UPDATE – Friday, March 13

Greetings everyone,

I apologize for another long communication. I knew when I sent the communication Thursday that it would quickly become outdated. The most important words in that earlier communication were “for now.” In light of further research, interaction with lay leaders, and the Bishop’s guidance earlier today (following her conversation with diocesan clergy yesterday), I have determined that further changes will be made to worship at St. Michael’s following this weekend. I’ll describe these *temporary* changes first, then give my rationale. Not everyone will agree with the course of action I have chosen (with input from lay leaders), and other churches will pursue their own courses. So the rationale offered is mine in light of much conversation, research, and reflection. First, the changes:

This Weekend

This weekend’s services will go on as planned, generally following the guidelines I described on Thursday for interaction. However, per the Bishop’s instructions, there will be no wine distributed this weekend; we will only serve the bread for communion. This is the Bishop’s instruction for the diocese until Easter. Remember, if you are feeling unwell, you should stay home to take care of yourself and to prevent the spread of whatever ails you.

In addition to these changes, there will be no nursery this weekend. The youth have already been notified that there will be no youth group Sunday night.

Sunday Worship until Easter

After this weekend, until Easter, all Eucharist services are canceled, including Saturday, Sunday, and Wednesday services. On Sunday mornings at 10 a.m., a livestream of Morning Prayer, Rite II will be led from the chapel at St. Michael’s. You will receive further instructions about how to link up with that service; we will most likely use Facebook live. You do not need to have a Facebook account to watch. As I describe below, this decision is not about communion but about social distancing. (While I do not know all of their reasoning, the cathedral in Topeka is also moving to a livestreamed morning prayer).

Wednesday Lenten Classes

Our Lenten Class on the women of Matthew’s lineage of Jesus is on hiatus immediately. We will pick up again when this Covid-19 business calms down in a month or two (most likely). So we will complete that journey.

Other Things to Note

- The church office is closed next week (March 16-20). Some staff will be working from home, but some are on vacation spending time with their families during spring break.
- The day school is also closed for spring break.
- Jerry Kirkwood has worked very hard to clean and disinfect the building thoroughly, especially those areas that will be in use this weekend. Be sure to thank him next time you see him.

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Why Such Aggressive Measures?

Again, some will disagree with me, and other churches will follow their own course. But as I thought about the situation this morning, read everything that I could from the experts, and heard the thought of some of our own medical professionals, I decided that the real issue for me is our public moral responsibility. Modern medicine and the germ theory of disease are gifts. Through God's grace and the hard work of many, we have the knowledge to significantly mitigate the impact of a viral disease like Covid-19. I want us to use that knowledge aggressively so that we reduce the number of people who get sick. I want us to stay out in front of the spread of this disease as much as possible, rather than waiting to respond to worsening conditions.

A lot of attention has understandably been directed at the mortality rate of this disease, but there is a lot of suffering involved for those who get seriously ill, even if they survive—suffering for the sick person and their family. The more aggressive we are as a nation, the more we limit the suffering that our neighbors might endure.

Ultimately, it is the issue of “social distancing” that has provoked such an aggressive response. While the World Health Organization initially said we should maintain a 3-foot distance, American agencies, including the CDC and the Mayo Clinic have stressed a 6-foot distance (complete with illustrations to explain). Stress has been placed on social distancing as one of the most significant steps we can take to reducing the spread of this disease. Maintaining that kind of separation within large groups is impossible. Communion physically requires us to violate it. And our narthex is a bottleneck; as they say in the movies, “It’s the perfect place for an ambush.” In light of this, I simply do not think there is a way responsibly to gather for worship. The situation is not just about whether you or I get sick, but how much we contribute to the spread of this virus to others.

I realize that we do not have a reliable picture of the virus's spread in our area. For me, the proper scientific response to that lack of knowledge is to be proactive. My concern is that by the time we know how much the virus has permeated our area, our reactions will be far less effective. By this point, I think we all know that a person with a confirmed case of Covid-19 has been carrying the virus around for usually 5 days, perhaps as many as 14. The aggressive measures we are taking can deter the spread of the virus whether we know of its presence or not. This deterrence ultimately “flattens the incidence curve” as we have heard on television or read online, which means that we help prevent healthcare professionals from being overwhelmed by too many cases at once. For example, you may have seen the realities about how many ICU beds and ventilators our country has; there are nowhere near as many of them as we would like.

I want everyone to know that these actions for me are grounded in moral conviction and my own logic (with which you might legitimately disagree). My point is that I am not motivated at all by anxiety or worry. So far, globally, this pandemic is progressing the way experts expect. In a matter of weeks (probably 4-8 weeks) we will be past the hard part. In the meantime, we will remain faithful to God and to each other, remembering to rejoice in the Lord always and to let our requests be made known to God. God will provide us with the peace that only God can give.

Thank you for your patience and resilience during this time. I look forward to being bound by the Spirit on Sunday mornings for Morning Prayer. And I look forward to actually seeing you again soon. Until then, we will continue to use technology as much as we can to maintain our connections with one another, not only in worship but in our small groups and ministry teams. Let us see this time as an opportunity to explore more ways to connect with one another and to take care of one another.

Peace,
Fr. David