



March 11, 2020

Dear Friends in the Diocese of Lexington,*

I have invited you into a Lenten fast from public worship for two weeks, but if local circumstances convince you to gather for worship, you should take these important actions to mitigate the spread of the disease. Here is a list of preparations we can offer at this time, with the understanding that that recommendations may change quite fluidly as we learn more.

To begin with, I would like to ask each congregation to take the following steps:

- Convene your vestry or bishop's committee by video or telephone conference and decide how you will implement these recommendations.
- Make plans now to live stream your Sunday services, or pre-record a Morning Prayer service and make it available online for members who decide to stay home on Sunday, or in the event that church services need to be canceled.
- Create a simple, full bulletin for Morning Prayer and email it to all of your members (snail mail for those who cannot get online), so that those who choose to stay home can still participate in Sunday worship there. You may wish to include a written reflection on the Sunday lectionary, so people do receive a sermon.
- Create a phone tree and get in touch with every member of your congregation. Inform them that we are recommending that those who are elderly, immunocompromised, or have underlying health conditions stay home from worship. Inform them of the ways to participate in Sunday worship (online or via paper bulletin) and promise to stay in touch. Plan to check on your members who stay home periodically over the next few weeks using the phone tree. Help them know that even when they are not physically present for worship, we care about them as part of our church family.
- Cancel or postpone all non-essential church gatherings or move them to video or telephone conference format.

In addition, I ask you to consider doing the following things:

Worship Practices:

- Start live-streaming your services right away for those who are vulnerable and choose to stay at home. This will allow them to stay connected to their church community. We offer some tips to [help you start live-streaming here](#).

Choose one of the following two options for Sunday worship:

1. Offer Morning Prayer for the remaining three Sundays in Lent, rather than Eucharist, to avoid some of the high-touch practices of the Eucharist.
2. If you offer Eucharist, follow the practices below:
 - The entire altar party should go to the sacristy and thoroughly wash their hands with soap and water for twenty seconds each during the Offertory, before setting the table for communion. Anyone who touches their face after hand-washing should wash again, or use hand sanitizer.
 - Position hand sanitizers at the front of the church and ask people to use them before receiving communion.
 - Consider offering standing communion instead of kneeling, so that people do not touch the altar rail.
 - Ask your congregation to hold their hands flat for receiving the bread and avoid touching the priest's or deacon's hand during distribution. The priest or deacon should use hand sanitizer again if he/she inadvertently touches a hand.
 - Consecrate a small amount of wine, but do not offer it at the altar rail. Instead, have a chalice stand at a separate position off to the side and offer it to those who decide they want to receive wine. Inform your congregation that they receive the full benefits of communion if they receive bread only. Do not allow intinction and use a silver chalice (which is easier to clean than pottery). Use port wine or another wine with a high alcohol content, as it is more likely to kill germs.
 - If clergy decide instead not to offer wine at all, I will support them in that decision.

In addition, please observe these other precautions during worship:

- Ask people to bring their own hand sanitizers or wipes from home, and use them when touching surfaces, using door handles, etc.
- Remove standing water from the font or stoup. Some local congregations have chosen instead to put sand in the stoup, as a Lenten symbol of Jesus' sojourn in the desert.
- Ask people not to touch each other while entering or exiting the church or passing the Peace. Instead, practice waves and bows. One bishop suggests teaching the American Sign Language for "God loves you." Discourage your congregation from holding hands during the Lord's Prayer, and do not shake hands as people depart.
- Do not pass the offering plate from hand to hand. Instead, leave it in a central place for people to place their offerings.
- Consider alternate practices for Holy Week. For instance, for Maundy Thursday foot washing, the practice could be symbolic, washing the feet of only one or two people. For Good Friday, discourage reverencing the cross by touching or kissing it; encourage a bow or a kneeling prayer instead.

Food Service:

- Consider fasting from coffee hour for the remainder of Lent. It's appropriate and helps slow the spread of germs from food that is handled by many people.
- If you need to serve food, please ban self-service buffets and have all food served in individual containers, or by food servers wearing gloves. Do not allow other people to handle the serving pieces.

- Wash all dishes in a dishwasher rather than by hand, as the water heats to higher temperatures and the dishwasher cleans more thoroughly. Use paper goods if you do not have a dishwasher in the church.

Cleaning of Surfaces:

- Before worship, go over door handles, pew tops, restroom handles, locks, and faucets, and importantly, the altar rail with cloths and a household cleanser.
- Repeat the cleaning of high-traffic areas after each worship service.

Travel:

- While it is reasonable to wait until the last minute to cancel planned trips, think carefully about church-related travel. In particular, consider canceling adult trips to non-US destinations, because you may end up in quarantine or with a member sick in another country.
- For spring break youth trips, now is the time to cancel any spring non-US travel plans. It would be a disaster for a group of teenagers to be quarantined away from home without their parents, or for teenagers or chaperones to be taken ill on a trip. You can find mission activities to substitute for that non-US travel in your local area. For planned summer youth trips, watch the news carefully and cancel youth travel plans if quarantines continue.

Pastoral Visits:

- Cancel non-essential pastoral visits for now. Restrict home and hospital visits to extreme cases. Substitute phone chats and pray with people over the phone.
- Set up phone calls and video chats with homebound parishioners.
- As outlined above, create a phone tree so you can easily check in with all your parishioners.
- Create a ministry to deliver groceries and other essentials to quarantined members. Bring groceries and supplies to those who are ill or quarantined and leave them on the doorstep.
- Prepare home Sunday school lessons for children and Bible studies for adults, and make them available by email or video for those who choose to stay home.
- Encourage your members to get to know their neighbors at home. In a time of quarantine or illness, neighbors caring for neighbors is an excellent way that people can help each other.

Staff and Lay Ministers:

- Anyone who feels the least bit sick should stay home. There are no employees or lay ministers so essential that the church cannot adjust.
- Be sure to train someone other than the priest to lead Morning Prayer so they can fill in at the last minute if necessary. Direct them to the [Sermons that Work](#) website provided by the Episcopal Church if they need to read a prepared sermon. Or, a clergy member who feels well enough could prepare a sermon in advance and deliver it by video link on a computer at home.
- Office and day school staff should be given paid sick leave if they are ill, or if they have reason to believe they have been exposed to the virus.
- Consider allowing any staff who can work at home to do so.

Feeding Programs:

- Many of our churches have important feeding programs for people living with homelessness or for other marginalized people. Keep in mind that these are among the most vulnerable people in our society. Observe the same precautions as listed above under “Food Service” to keep your feeding programs safe.
- Wear gloves to hand out non-perishable food and other items.

As Christians, it is natural for us to feel fear, but “God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” Tim. 1:7. In our Diocese of Lexington, let us act with courageous love to care for our faith communities, families, and neighbors.

Above all, pray. Pray for those who are ill, those who cannot work, those who are alone in quarantine, and all who are suffering from the current economic disruptions. Prayer is effective, and it is a ministry Christians can engage in on behalf of our neighbors and ourselves. And please know that I am praying for you, your clergy, and your leaders as we all do what we can to respond to this crisis with courageous love.

In Christ,

Bishop Mark Van Koevering

**adapted from the Rt. Rev. Susan Brown Snook (Episcopal Diocese of San Diego)*