

Dear Friends,

Greetings in these days of the Lenten journey to the Cross. The news about the coronavirus continues to grow and deaths are mounting. Many are asking “what can we do to be prepared?”. The very first step of preparation is prayer. We begin in prayer that the Lord of all will bring healing to those who are sick, comfort to those who mourn, and an end to the spread of this virus.

Today the news is about “when” it is going to impact us and not “if” it will impact us. When the conversation becomes about “when”, then it becomes especially important to talk about how we will respond. This newsletter encourages you to think through of three types of responses:

1. Church and School Public Gatherings
2. Church and School Continuity of Business
3. Care and Compassion to our Neighbors

### **Church and School Public Gatherings**

It is important to follow the council of the local and state government. If for the welfare and safety of residents, the decision is made to close programs that bring together groups of people, then that must be respected. But before we get to that place, there are some simple preparation steps that can be taken.

- Communications

Have a communications system in place so that you can be in contact with school families and congregants. Rehearse your system so that the first time you need it is not the first time you use it. Telephone, e-mail, web page, internet groups, and Facebook are all good systems. Some of our schools use a program called **Calling Post** ([www.callingpost.com](http://www.callingpost.com)). This will send messages in multiple forms.

- Gathering for Worship and Bible Study

Encourage your members to practice good health. If they are not feeling well, have a cough, or feel flu-like symptoms then please encourage them to stay home. Work through alternative ways to include at-home folks to be connected. Ascension, Landover Hills does a worship service for shut ins using a conference phone call on Sunday evenings. Many of our churches use Facebook live or live streaming to reach out to those in the neighborhood or who are housebound. Our SED website includes a list of congregations offering this service. You can check it out at <http://se.lcms.org/resources/live-streaming-congregations/>

It may be that you will want to use only the individual cup during the celebration of the Eucharist. Encourage the washing of hands prior to distribution and following distribution. Consider putting smaller bottles of hand sanitizer in each pew.

As you greet one another or exchange greetings during the sharing of peace, consider a simple head bow, a wave, or a fist bump.

It is also a good thing to ask those who are maintaining the facilities to be extra diligent in wiping down surfaces and door handles.

- The School Community

Parents will want to know your plans for addressing this concern. Determine at what threshold you would suspend a class or school and for how long this would be. Communicate the steps you are taking to mitigate the impact of the virus: attention to cleaning surfaces and other common-used areas, home learning opportunities, communication systems, and the make-up of classwork.

The importance of practicing good hygiene cannot be overlooked. Wash hands with soap and warm water frequently. Use a hand sanitizer if water is not immediately available. Cover the mouth when sneezing and avoid touching the nose or eyes.

Most schools have a policy stating that children should be 24 hours fever-free before they return. If we move into a period where there are coronavirus flu cases in our neighborhoods and classrooms, you may want to extend the 24 hours or require a doctor's written note before a child may return to school.

If absences are significant or if the local government or Center for Disease Control issues closures for your area, you will want to respect that. However, the possibility to keep current through e-learning does exist. (Refer to your local school districts to know what policies they have in place for e-learning during school closures.) If you are going to use e-learning, then develop procedures and practice it before you launch into it.

Communicate with your families – often.

### **Church and School Continuity of Business**

If it should become necessary to close your building, what is your capacity for continuing to manage business? Have you prepared plans to address Business Continuity in the event that you must close the office for a period of time?

If you have a plan in place, now is a good time to review it. If not, use this opportunity to gather with two or three leaders and develop one. Consider what will happen with the mail, what banking needs must be covered while the church and school offices are closed, and how will you manage vendors and payroll.

You may want to create and keep a list of those who are most vulnerable for respiratory illness. Identify a team of care-givers who will regularly check in with them during in time of heightened awareness.

### **Care and Compassion to our Neighbors**

We are also concerned for our neighbors and want to offer Christ's compassion to them. As more information becomes available, and if the need presents itself, we will know specific ways that we may serve our neighbor. It may be that your building can be used as an immunization center. Consider what you would need to do if that were to happen. If you are already providing food packs to local families through the public school, you will want to plan for how you can continue to serve these families. Your gift of weekend meals will become even more

important if the school is closed and they are not getting breakfast and lunch each day. If you support a soup kitchen, meals on wheels, or have a food ministry program, how might you reshape it so that these needed services may continue?

During times of great stress and discomfort, people will turn to the church for comfort. It may be that you can provide daily devotionals on-line, prayers through your website, or encouragement on Facebook. Be open to the ways that Holy Spirit might use you to bring hope and calm into a moment of chaos and fear.

**In summary:**

- Practice good hygiene, especially around hand-washing, covering coughs, and remaining at home when you are feeling ill.
- Communicate with your congregation, school families, and community.
- Gather with a small group of leaders and work through your action plans, especially if you are asked to cancel or limit worship, close school or the child care center.
- Finally, consider your neighbor and how the Lord may be leading you to reach out with acts of compassion and care.

We are here to support you in your ministry and serving. If we can be of further assistance, please reach out to us. Thank you for the many ways you show compassion to the children of God. Together we will join in prayer firmly believing that *Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust." Surely, he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence.* Psalm 91:1-3

In His Service,

Sally J Hiller