

As we are all aware, the global spread of the coronavirus, COVID-19, has become a central topic of discussion and concern for many of us. It has caused us to think about the things we take for granted and to rethink how we go about the practices of our daily lives. In the church, this pandemic has caused us to consider new ways to approach what have been longstanding practices and traditions.

Over the past few weeks, I have received a good number of emails from our pastors, asking for encouragement and advice. The questions I have received have ranged from whether to greet each other with handshakes, to how to best conduct Holy Communion, to whether we should cancel worship and encourage people to simply stay home and pray? And what about offerings? And what about midweek Lenten worship? And what about a variety of other concerns related to the ministry we share?

The questions being asked are valid. The concerns regarding the coronavirus are real. Real lives are being touched, and real lives are being lost, and real people for whom our Lord died are being affected by this pandemic. As bishop, I would encourage you to use your own wisdom in determining what would be best and most well-received in your own setting and by your own people. Talk with the pastors in your area. Reach out to those whose wisdom you trust. Do not be afraid to make changes. Err on the side of good health practices. Care for those who are isolated. Make phone calls to those unable to come to church. Be good pastors. Continue preaching and teaching the name of Jesus.

I would also encourage you to stay well informed of what the health professionals are telling us and to stay in touch with what is happening and being recommended in your own communities. I have included a few links at the close of this note as possible places for good advice, including a few helpful links provided by Mary Bates, NALC disaster response coordinator, and our own Disaster Response Team. We want and we need to be wise in what we do.

At the same time, we do not want or need to live in fear. I am not afraid of the coronavirus. I am not afraid of the possibility that it might infect someone in my own life, including myself. I am concerned and I want to be wise, but I am not afraid.

I have a long list of concerns related to the coronavirus. I am concerned for the elderly who are the most at risk. I am concerned for the disenfranchised and for those on the streets who have no one and nowhere to turn. I am concerned for the loss of reason that seems to have overtaken so many in their own personal response to what is truly a communal concern. I am concerned that people are stockpiling supplies they do not need, so much so that those who do need them are not able to find them. I am concerned for our hospitals and our clinics and for the doctors and nurses and overcrowded emergency rooms that are all being stretched. I am concerned for our economy and for those whose lives will be impacted by the loss of jobs. I am concerned for a long list of things, for these and many more, but I am not afraid...neither should we, as a Church, be afraid.

Rather than live in fear, let us together approach this challenge in faith. We have an opportunity to model for our children and for families and for each other what a faith-filled and faithful response can be. Instead of living in panic and in fear, being reactionary and taking a self-centered response, we have a chance to remain rational and reasoned and to approach this pandemic in a spirit of trust.

COVID-19 does not appear to be ending soon. Chances are, before it goes away, it will hit even closer to home. It is in many of our cities. It is making its way into our churches. It may well enter some of our families and the lives of those we love. Be careful. Be cautious. Be wise and practical in what you do. But do not live in fear.

What I fear, more than COVID-19, is that we will forget who we are and to whom we belong. As a church, we need to take preventive measures and commit ourselves to prayer. We need to rely on the health professionals for advice and entrust our lives to Christ. We need to take full advantage of the resources we have been given and follow the best-practices of those who can give helpful and health-giving advice. And then we need to step back and stay centered and remember and remind each other that we belong to Christ.

Know that I am praying for you and for our church body. I am praying for our leaders and for those who will make decisions throughout the world. I am praying for our pastors and for our congregations and for God's Holy Spirit to protect us as a church. I am praying and I will continue to pray until the coronavirus is over, and beyond, but I am not afraid.

The apostle Paul says it well. *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 4:6-7 ESV)

We should be concerned. The coronavirus is real. But we cannot and we will not be afraid. We are the Church and, together, we belong to Christ.

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For more materials and devotions related to the coronavirus pandemic our NALC has posted on this site:

<https://thenalc.org/projects/resources-during-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19/>