

March 13, 2020

Dear Friends,

I would be surprised if you have not been concerned about the safety of gathering in your congregations as COVID-19 has been increasingly reported on and discussed as a threat to our health and safety. In light of that, I want you to know that I appreciate the complexity of determining whether your congregation should suspend gatherings for even short periods of time. Earlier today, the First Presidency released updated guidance in a statement that is provided on the World Church website, in Mission Center communications, through emails and social media. From that statement we hear:

“...the First Presidency advises congregations and mission centers to suspend church gatherings such as worship services, meals, conferences, funerals, and other group activities in response to the projected spread of the COVID-19 virus. The anticipated duration of this recommended suspension of group activities is three weeks.”

Even though, the AZ Dept of Health Services has classified the state as at “minimal” risk for COVID-19 spread, the epidemiologist who presented a webinar for faith-based communities this morning highlighted an important exception. Those who are most vulnerable to a poor outcome are seniors over 60, those with a weakened immune system, and/or those having respiratory illnesses. As you may know, that is a large demographic in our worship gatherings.

Because of this we have been asked to carefully consider whether weekly worship is a reasonable risk to accept for your congregation. Again, because many of us will experience no symptoms, we could inadvertently carry the virus into a gathering where more people are at risk for serious health effects of the virus.

By avoiding unnecessary social contact, you are helping slow the progression of the virus in the community. This protects those who are more vulnerable to serious medical complications and allows for the healthcare system to keep up with those who need more care to recover from the virus. If the healthcare system is less overwhelmed with care demand, more lives can be saved.

In light of the counsel provided, please remember there are still many ways for congregations and individuals to change “social distancing” into community connections such as making calls, emails, sending cards, and using video calls.

You can also find links to [online ministries](#), [worship and formation resources](#), and [ways to give](#).

On a final note, here are some important recommendations from reliable government agencies that should be implemented if you do engage in gathering. You may not be the one responsible for all of these actions, but you should be aware your pastors have been advised to implement them.

- Do *NOT* attend gatherings if you are feeling ill, or you have flu-like symptoms.
- Call your personal healthcare provider if your respiratory health changes, especially if you have a chronic or immunodeficient healthcare condition.

- Wash your hands often for at least 20 seconds. Carry alcohol-based hand sanitizers with you and use it often in public environments.
- Set out hand-sanitizer at the entrance to the church, in bathrooms, kitchens and childcare areas.
- Clean all hard surfaces and toys with disinfectants.
- All sneezes and coughs should be covered by tissue or caught within a bent elbow. Discard used tissue promptly in sealed containers.
- Turn off water fountains and do not use them during this time of the pandemic.
- In congregational life, refrain from usual person-to-person greetings that involve hugs, kisses or handshakes, and expand personal distance from each other in pews or classes.
- Wash your hands prior to and after serving communion, when preparing food, after using restrooms, coughs or sneezes.
- Follow all WHO, CDC and local health services guidelines for Food Ministry preparations and service.
  - WHO <https://www.who.int/>
  - CDC <https://www.cdc.gov/>
  - AZ Department of Health Services <https://www.azdhs.gov/>

I will monitor the situation daily for World Church, community, state and national recommendations that would require changes to our gatherings. Currently, mission center events have been suspended through the end of April, but I will use your congregational leaders, email and the Weekly Update newsletter to notify you of any changes.

We are Community of Christ, and while we desire to be in each other's presence, how we gather can influence whether we are able to do so. We can be wise without being fearful. You are valued, loved and lifted in prayer as individuals and a community.

*In the peace of Christ,*

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“We are all meant to be mothers of God...for God is always needing to be born.” — *Meister Eckhart*