

COVID-19 Updates: Cancellation of All Services for Two Weeks

March 12, 2020

Dear Ones,

As you can tell, and as most of you are living through, this current situation is changing very rapidly. With the Governor's declaration yesterday that all meetings over 250 cease and the strong encouragement to bring all gatherings of any size to a minimum, and now a Local Health Officer Directive from Seattle/King Co., I have decided to also ask for more restrictions going forward. I believe similar if not exact replicas of this Health Officer Directive went out from Snohomish and Pierce County as well. This afternoon, I understand Thurston County put a similar order in place. This order has prompted updated guidelines for religious organizations, and it just came out today. In [these updated guidelines](#) you will find some added requirements for holding gatherings below 250 people. You will also find that if you cannot assure that these are done, you are in violation of the law. This includes all parties that use your facility.

With all of this in mind, and in deep discernment and prayer over this decision, I have decided to require the cancellation of all services and gatherings at all our congregations in the Diocese of Olympia for the next two weeks. This includes Sunday worship. This includes any groups currently have meeting in our buildings. I am basically asking you to shut down your facilities for two weeks if at all possible. In lieu of meeting face to face, I hope you will make every effort to offer virtual worship, which I will address in more detail below, or at the very least direct them to the [11:00am Live stream from Saint Mark's Cathedral](#) which will continue under the guidelines below.

So, to put it plainly. I am calling for the closure to the public of all our worshipping congregations for a period of two weeks inclusive of, and running through, Sunday March 22nd. A decision will be made on or before March 22nd on what comes next.

I have continued to follow all information that many have sent, and much that has been researched or interesting. I am convinced, along with many of our health officials, that there is not much treatment to be had with this, and that we have to do this for the good of the whole. Even if you are not truly at risk, we are all carriers, or can be, and that alone is a reason to take this action. I will face, and have, as have the priests in our diocese, the accusation of "not loving or caring for the flock of Christ" which I understand but which I roundly deny.

In this instance, if we can - and we can - play our part in slowing community spread, we should, and by so doing, we are "loving" not only our flock, but all in the communities we live in. I cite below a study of the cities of Philadelphia and St. Louis and the vast difference in their responses to the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic. Philadelphia attempted to curtail "hotspots" and events, but never shut all things down. St. Louis, on the other hand, chose to go full throttle early on in containment and on cessation of large meetings, and St. Louis did far better both in the number of deaths and infections. St. Louis also was able to come back from it quicker.

During this COVID-19 outbreak, there is now data worth watching on this topic. [Like this article from SLATE](#) which talks about the difference in the US Response and the excellent containment that has been attained in Singapore and Taiwan, where infections have been kept low, as well as deaths. Taiwan has one direct death from this so far.

This action is difficult. I do not deny that, and it is needed if we want to accomplish the slowing of the spread. We owe it both to our church community, as well as the community we reside to be part of all we can do. It appears Judaism and Islam locally is way ahead of us on this, having cancelled their gatherings, mostly, even last weekend.

We did learn last night, which many of you now know, of the third rector that has been confirmed as

infected with COVID-19. All three were present at the recent CEEP meeting. We have several here in quarantine and/or in isolation, some confirmed, some not.

Additionally, we have a retired priest in isolation and fighting hard for health, and now several known exposures from our past Sunday gatherings. I am asking us to stop gathering face to face, but surely not to stop being the Church. We need to find ways to stay in touch, which I know you all are working on so diligently. There are a myriad of ideas out there how to do this.

Your Liturgy and Arts Commission is working hard to give you resources as well. I give you their work [here](#). Please look this over. There are some excellent ideas here as we move into this new way of being the Body of Christ.

The Rev. Josephine Robertson has written eloquently on how to frame this request and these actions within our call as Christians. You can read her thoughts [here](#).

There are so many other issues which we are going to need to be part of. I have had several ask how we can help those children who are losing free lunches during school since many schools are out. I do not know answers to that right away, but will keep looking for answers. However, what is already coming up, is, for instance, the single mother or father, who now has children at home, no childcare, and no pay. So, with all of that, and with the many other issues that will come up, I would urge you to build up and promote your local discretionary fund, but I am also putting a fund together here at the diocesan level where anyone could give to help in these kind of situations. I am also sending out an appeal for the Diocese of Jerusalem, one of our companion relationships who are suffering greatly already. And here in our diocese a great need by Chaplains on the Harbor. I will send these opportunities out soon by separate letter.

I am going close this with a poem that the Rev. Shelly Fayette, Rector, Christ Church Seattle, sent. I think this poem is moving and compelling to what this post is all about. I offer it as an ending prayer and as a reason for these actions in our coming days.

*she wanted to know if
I understood how important
the event was.
and I looked at my hands, palms up,
for a second.
I thought about the saliva pooling
behind my bottom teeth.
droplet transmission
and rulers—three feet, six feet.
six is the radius of transmission.
I want you to be the number of feet away
that keeps us alive
as many of us as possible.
last week, I sat in the doorway and
squirted people's hands with sanitizer
as they dispersed. reflections of the divine
and vectors.
pandemic sacrament
next week, all the sanitizer may be gone.
your friends getting treated in a hospital hallway.
doctors wearing diapers, collapsing, sometimes dying.
When I ask you to stay home
to stop the social spread of COVID-19,
I still know that you are strong and
beautiful and brave.
I know that you have taught yourself to
understand that love is an action.
but, today, beloved, today, love is an
inaction—of stopping, of staying, of
holding, not hands, but hearts.
of holding the space between us, not only
as a buffer, but also as holy.
there is so much we don't know about
the tiny parasite taking over cells,*

*reproducing at an alarmingly rapid rate.
I know more about you; that your insistence
on business as usual maybe be tinged with
other things, but is mostly dedication.
you must now dedicate yourself to the survival
of this community in the painstaking way of
an artist painting on a grain of rice.
I do know how important
your life is, thrown together
with ours.
we are a fragile masterpiece.
(the vulnerable age was
lowered to 50 yesterday.)
please stay home.
—on a day of social distancing
- the Rev. Theresa Inés Soto*

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