

COVID-19 Updates

March 4, 2020

Dear Ones,

As you are all very aware, the COVID-19 spread is a rapidly changing issue in our lives, and even more so in King County and Western Washington. We have, sadly, become the epicenter of this event in the US for the moment. While I cannot disclose details we do, in fact, now have several of our churches directly affected with some of the people in quarantine. We do now have one instance of possible spread by an individual(s) while in our churches which occurred at Emmanuel, Mercer Island. I want to reiterate there is no evidence at all that these people contracted it there, but simply they have become ill since attending. At this point two people are ill and there is no verification if they are ill with COVID-19, but out of an abundance of caution Emmanuel did close their school and today is having their facilities deep cleaned by CDC guidelines. I want to commend the Rev. Elizabeth Riley, Rector, who has handled this so very well. And I would ask your prayers for her, for her congregation, and for all those currently affected. In reality, we need to consider ourselves all affected and keep keenly aware of our roles in this. Our collective efforts, yours and mine, is to try to keep this from happening any further.

Being part of the Presiding Bishop's Council of Advice, the Presiding Bishop called that group together today via Zoom and after that discussion he made the decision to move the planned, and usual, face to face House of Bishops meeting in Navasota, Texas for next week, to a virtual meeting. I fully support this decision. It will cost us all something to change it at this late date, but it is the prudent thing to do.

I want to reiterate how difficult it is from this vantage point to stay on top of everything, but how very much we are trying. Our effort here in the Office of the Bishop is to try to give all the information we can, without being alarming or confusing, which is not totally possible in this situation, but also useful and timely information. We also, equally, want to be a resource and support for those dealing with this on the front lines. Three significant meetings took place yesterday. First, our Dean Steve Thomason met, along with other faith leaders, with Governor Inslee, a prescheduled meeting for another matter, which of course turned into a meeting on COVID-19, its spread, and the state's response. I want to connect you directly to the dean's report of this meeting which [you can read here](#).

Second, a meeting with faith leaders and the King County Health Officials. The Rev. Canon Britt Olsen attended that meeting, and this is her report of that given to me last night. [You can read that here](#).

Third, the Rev. Patty Baker, St. Clare, Snoqualmie, our Episcopal Relief and Development and Diocesan Disaster Coordinator for the diocese has been in constant contact with officials and also attended a webinar yesterday on this topic. You can go to the Episcopal Relief & Development site and see a [summary of their recommendations here](#).

Now, if you read all of these, you will note differences. They are difficult to avoid in such circumstances. It is proof that there is so much we have yet to know about this spread and about this virus. But, there are just as many things we do know. The most important of these things is this: Each person has it in their power and control to take measures so that they do not get the infection, nor spread it. And these have remained pretty constant. Wash hands (correctly, resources for your use on this [can be found here](#)), sanitize often, avoid bodily contact with others, stop shaking hands and hugging. For now, bow or gesture with your eyes, of course, do not share cups, utensils, or anything else that might share bodily fluids.

With all of this new information and with some new requests from health officials, I have decided to require the clergy of this diocese to practice the following guidelines:

1. While the common cup, properly administered, has been scientifically proven to be safer than intinction, health officials are now asking us to cease the use of the common cup. For this reason, I am asking that this be done in all of our parishes starting immediately. The cup can certainly continue to be used by the priest in the presidency of the Eucharist but offering it to the altar party and/or the congregation should cease for the time being. Last week I asked you to consider stopping the practice of intinction. Today, I am directing you to stop the use of the common cup.

2. With this in mind, communion will only be offered in one kind, the bread. With this, I have received a few new practices and ideas. One is to have as few people as possible, preferably priests, to administer the bread, and that those people wash their hands and sanitize often while distributing. Every effort should be made not to touch the hands of those receiving. One step further, and I do not think this has been tried yet, but could certainly work, is for the presider to place bread in Dixie cups, and to set out a tray for congregants to come forward and carry back with them.

3. The new request from health officials regards the water in the baptismal font. I guess one good thing is that this is happening in Lent. So, for Lent, and until we know more, I am requesting that when possible, and if at all possible, water in the fonts be drained, and that the practice of dipping the hands in the water of a font be discontinued. Scientists who have reviewed this feel that the virus could be spread in this manner, though not proven. They also ask that if doing baptisms that new water be used for each person. I am directing you to do this however, this being Lent, there should be very few baptisms!

4. The Peace. All physical contact should be discontinued during the Peace. Many of you have already gone to this. Practice bowing, making a prayerful sign to the other person, looking at them lovingly and offering the Peace, but then moving on without touching.

5. Eucharistic Visitors. I believe this practice of sending Eucharistic Visitors should be ceased for now. Eucharistic Visitors visiting homes is an opportunistic issue with this virus, and puts those in the home, and those visiting, at risk. My request is that home visits be restricted to ordained persons for now and that Eucharistic Visitors not be deployed until further notice.

6. Passing the offering plate. You are urged not to pass this from hand to hand, despite what I have wished for over these past years. You are encouraged to instruct your people not to touch it, but to have your ushers make sure anyone who wants to put an offering in can. You might even put the plate in one spot and ask people to come to the plate to put in their offerings.

Additionally, make sure you have hand sanitizer in plentiful supplies at every entrance to your worship space, and your property. If you cannot find hand sanitizer use rubbing alcohol of 70% or more. And please reiterate to all congregants that each person should, in their own minds and hearts, decide how much or little they will participate. For now, health officials are not calling for gatherings to cease, but they are calling for us to be very mindful of how we gather and what we do when we do.

As things change, we will be constantly monitoring and putting out updates. Let's try to live out of preparation and education, and not fear. Let's be the people God calls us to be. I want to thank all of you, so many of you, doing heroic and good work, and for sending your concerns, ideas, suggestions, and praise. All of that is needed right now, from all of us. Finally, let's be "the Church" in this. We cannot hunker down or simply disappear, but indeed we must, also as we can, help others. We can, and should, pray, but also work for the good of the whole. That is certainly a real trait and signature of a professing Christian.

Faithfully,

+Greg

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