

## Pastoral Letter – Update!

March 13, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Well, as I shared in the letter you are about to read. Things are moving fast on how we should attack the COVID-19 epidemic. First, Governor Larry Hogan weighed in declaring a State of Emergency and State Superintendent of Maryland Schools Dr. Karen B. Salmon closed all public schools for two weeks. This was followed by a letter from our Bishop Easterling directing church in the District of Columbia to close and asking caution from all other churches. (That letter is attached to the following document.) But just this evening, Bishop Easterling updated her directive asking all churches in Maryland to suspend worship for two Sundays. Here is the text of that update.

“Following this afternoon's press conference by Maryland Governor Larry Hogan in which he declared a state of emergency, **Bishop Easterling is directing all United Methodist churches in the state of Maryland to not gather in their church buildings for two weeks; for conference camps and archives to close, and for the Mission Center building to close.** Conference Center staff will work remotely.

Bishop Easterling also encourages churches in West Virginia to make safety and their congregants' well-being a top priority. Please maintain appropriate personal space, and be alert to any announcements by state officials.

United Methodists throughout the conference should be checking on their neighbors and offering pastoral care to those in need whom they encounter. “

In compliance with our Bishop's directive, we will be suspending worship on March 15, 22 and 29. We will be streaming our messages through Facebook these next two Sundays and potentially also streaming our worship music. More details will follow.

In addition, in light of these closings, we as God's people must not suspend our mission to serve the marginalized. This will most likely be a season when the children blessed by our weekend backpack meals ministry will need weekday food since school lunches and breakfasts will not be available for at least two weeks. And our Baby Pantry could use younger souls who are not at high risk with the virus to staff our pantry. If you have been blessed to be able to work from home, perhaps that blessing is a call to bless others. Please email me directly if you would be willing to serve in the interim.

Finally, our leadership is still discerning the use of our facilities by smaller groups during the week, but would encourage you to NOT use our space since we have a limited cleaning schedule – especially in our sanctuary building. Consider this an opportunity to meet in homes or public space if you must meet. With such limited notice, groups that normally meet this Saturday should use their own discretion, but please clean afterwards.

# A Pastoral Letter to Community UMC

March 12, 2020

Dear Friends and Family of Community UMC,

As the news and cancellations continue to build, in light of what is now labeled a pandemic, and as bad news builds upon bad news, my heart goes out to each one of you. For some of our community, the COVID-19 virus poses more a nuisance than a threat, but for others, the nuisance is a threat – especially for those over 60 years of age or who have other complicating health factors. The news that a local church Rector in the District of Columbia tested positive for Corona Virus and that Washington State has limited gatherings to less than 250 has also not gone unnoticed by me as shepherd of this flock, bringing this crisis closer to home than I would prefer.

In light of all that is rapidly changing, I wanted to offer our plans based on what we know today, knowing that more news or government recommendations could change these plans. This is a long letter, for there is much to discuss, but I've sought to highlight a theological/historical foundation concerning our hearts and actions as well as practical steps we will take as of this date

First – **no matter where we are, we can and should pray.** At the close of this letter is a powerful prayer reflection entitled “A Prayer of Deliverance from the Coronavirus” from Pete Greig and 24-7 Prayer (Lectio 365). I commend it to you to pray and repeat as needed. It offers biblical reflections alongside guided prayer and is an excellent starting point if you don't know how you should pray.

Second – we have no way of knowing how this outbreak will impact the economy in our region. With mandatory or discretionary quarantining, persons in our church may experience financial hardship and we will need to think through how we can and should support them. Which also means to **think through how we can continue to give our tithes and offerings if we cannot attend worship together, as well as seeking servants to provide meals and encouragement to those who are homebound.**

Above all of the details and practical considerations is God's call on us to “love another,” First **Jesus and then Paul continued to remind us to be a counter-cultural community centered on active love as the response of God's overwhelming love for us.** Active love calls us to put into motion and outward expression what we believe in our hearts.

The good news is that we are not alone in this task, nor are we pioneers without guides. How the early church responded to outbreaks in the Roman empire should inspire us. In A.D. 165, there was an epidemic (likely smallpox) that devastated the Roman Empire. Somewhere between a quarter and a third of the entire population died. A similar epidemic (likely measles) further devastated the empire in A.D. 251. Early church fathers believed that these epidemics actually played a major role in the growth of Christianity within the empire. The early Christians were better able to cope with the disasters than their pagan/Hellenistic neighbors. Their mutual service and solidarity, together with some miraculous provision from God, meant that they experienced significantly higher rates of survival. Furthermore, the Christian social witness at the time was profound. While most who were able to do so fled the hotspots of infection, Christians frequently stayed behind and cared for the dying.

After the epidemic in 251, Dionysius Bishop of Alexandria wrote: “Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of the danger; they took charge of the sick, attending every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains.”

Contrast this with the account of their non-Christian neighbors: “The heathen behaved in the very opposite way. At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease.”

Of course, by the grace of God and the gift of modern medicine, I do not expect that we will face anything like what the early church faced. In this teachable moment, however, **I want to affirm that we have the same source of faith, hope, and love that they did. In Jesus Christ, we can act in profoundly generous ways because of the great love that he has given us and because of the hope that we have in resurrection.**

We may have a unique opportunity to witness to the world what salvation that comes through Jesus Christ looks like, in the flesh. I long for our modern day church to be filled with the type of Christians of whom it could be said, “they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains.” That, to me, sounds like Christ, who “has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases” (Isa. 53:4).

For good or for bad, this crisis will expose what is hidden within our hearts. We must resolve in our hearts that the elderly are worthy of protection and dignity, no matter how frail or vulnerable they are. Less critically, we must also resolve not to be people who wrestle the last roll of toilet paper from our neighbor in the store, but rather, be those who act generously and seek to look after one another within our community.

Will these hardships shake humanity out of its self-sufficiency, and potentially have us turn back to God? This is why our prayers are so important. This is an opportunity for people of faith to shine – to not shrink away in fear but to step boldly into loving with a living faith. In the face of hoarding and isolation, let us be those who share and comfort others. In the extreme, Christ-followers should have no fear of death since Christ’s victory over the grave has shown us the path of life. Do not be afraid.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Yours in Christ,  
Pastor Stan

(Thanks to Pastor David Jacobson of Catonsville UMC for his research on the early church and his list of practical commitments below.)

## Practical Commitments

So how can we practically live out our love of Christ? Part of preparing to be a blessing to others means being informed. I recommend that everyone go to the CDC web site for [coronavirus](#) and familiarize themselves with the content there. In particular, please read about those who are at [high risk](#) for getting very sick. Even if you yourself are not in this category, you may have regular contact with someone who is. We must consider how our personal attitudes toward getting sick will affect those whose bodies cannot protect themselves adequately. You may want to make preparations as if you were at high risk.

As stated early, at this time, our worship schedule will remain unchanged and our activities during the week will continue. Leaders of individual groups or activities are free to cancel or reschedule based on their demographics and particular concerns.

If you feel sick, please stay home. Generally speaking, each of us will need to decide whether we are willing to accept the risk of potential exposure as we gather together for worship, prayer, bible study, and the other activities of our church community. We have, in the past, and will moving forward offer our worship as a live video feed on Facebook for those who choose to remain home. Please “like” us on [Facebook](#) (Community United Methodist Church of Crofton) to receive notifications for future live stream options. Whether you choose to distance yourself from public gatherings or not, let us not look down on those who make a decision other than what we make, or even other than what we would make for them.

Should you choose to avoid attending worship for a time, please also consider how you might continue to support the church financially through [online giving](#) or by mailing your offering to the church (1690 Riedel Road, Crofton, MD 21114). Our Realm phone app (Realm Connect) actually makes it very easy to give – anytime, anywhere – even as a way to give on Sunday morning while in church. The link above offers a link to the app.

When you come to worship, there will be a few small changes that we have already implemented. For now, we will not formally greet one another by touch during our worship services. Although waves, first bumps, and other low-risk greetings are endearing, it is reasonable for us to lower the risk even further. Our offering baskets will not be passed but placed in the aisle to receive your offering. It will be difficult to find that new rhythm together, but I am confident that we will do so.

We will continue to serve communion on the first Sunday of the month, but we will not share from common bread and cup (intinction). Self-contained gluten free communion kits will be distributed by ushers who have practiced safe washing techniques which you will open when you return to your seats. But while we cannot share from a common cup, we can share a common time. Following the tradition of the EUBs (Evangelical United Brethren), we will all partake of the bread and then the cup at the same moment from our seats.

We have been frequently encouraged to wash our hands for 20 seconds. That just happens to be the time it takes to say the Lord’s Prayer. I encourage you to make good use of your hand-washing time!

Finally, let’s begin to call and check in on our elderly and vulnerable members. Those who need to restrict their travel may need additional assistance with shopping and other errands by those of us who are less at risk while out and about.

## **“A Prayer of Deliverance from the Coronavirus” from Pete Greig/24-7 Prayer”**

Lord Jesus Christ, we ask you to protect us from the spread of the coronavirus. You are powerful and merciful; let this be our prayer:

“Have mercy on me, my God, have mercy on me, for in you I take refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed.” (Psalm 57:1)

Jehovah Shalom, Lord of Peace, we remember those living in coronavirus hotspots and those currently in isolation. May they know your presence in their isolation, your peace in their turmoil and your patience in their waiting. Prince of Peace, you are powerful and merciful; let this be their prayer:

“May your mercy come quickly to meet us, for we are in desperate need. Help us, God our Savior, for the glory of your name.” (Psalm 79:8)

God of all Comfort and Counsel, we pray for those who are grieving, reeling from the sudden loss of loved ones. May they find your fellowship in their suffering, your comfort in their loss, and your hope in their despair. We name before you those known to us who are vulnerable and scared - the frail, the sick and the elderly.

God of all Comfort, you are powerful and merciful; may this be our prayer:

“He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us.” (2 Corinthians 1:10)

Jehovah Rapha, God who heals, we pray for all medical professionals dealing daily with the intense pressures of this crisis. Grant them resilience in weariness, discernment in diagnosis, and compassion upon compassion as they care. We thank you for the army of researchers working steadily and quietly towards a cure - give them clarity, serendipity and unexpected breakthroughs today. Would you rise above this present darkness as the Sun of Righteousness with healing in your rays. May this be our prayer:

“Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you.” (Jeremiah 32:17)

God of all Wisdom, we pray for our leaders: the World Health Organization, national governments, and local leaders too - heads of schools, hospitals and other institutions. Since you have positioned these people in public service for this hour, we ask you to grant them wisdom beyond their own wisdom to contain this virus, faith beyond their own faith to fight this fear, and strength beyond their own strength to sustain vital institutions through this time of turmoil. God of all Wisdom and Counsel, you are powerful and merciful; may this be our prayer:

“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear” (Psalms 46:1-2)

I bless you with the words of Psalm 91: “Surely he will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.” (Psalm 91:3-7)

“Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer.” (Psalm 4:1)

May El Shaddai, the Lord God Almighty who loves you protect you. May Jesus Christ, His Son who died for you save you. And may the Holy Spirit who broods over the chaos and fills you with his presence, intercede for you and in you for others at this time.

“The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.” (2 Timothy 4:18)