

March 14, 2020

Dear brothers and sisters,

We understand that we are in a time of grave uncertainty where the Coronavirus is concerned. To hear a Governor declare a State Emergency or the President declare a National Emergency understandably increases our fear about the situation.

The question has been raised – should we suspend worship? Our District Executive Minister, Gene Hagenberger, issued a statement Friday evening, which is included at the end of this message. In part, Brother Gene mentioned that “Frederick CoB will be closed this Sunday and will be undergoing a “deep cleaning” in the coming week, with the staff planning for how the congregation may resume worship for multiple groups of less than 250 persons.” {my underline}

Within our church facility, the cleaning service already is taking extra measures to sanitize areas that are frequently touched, such as the backs of the pews where we frequently rest our hands. In other words, we believe that steps are being taken for “deep cleaning,” but we will explore in the coming week to see if there is more that should be done.

A decision will be made this week about Sunday worship. But our decision needs not only to address Sunday morning worship, but also to look at other activities within our facility. We need to determine a path forward which is the best for our church family and for the community around us.

In the meantime, if you are in a higher risk group (defined as “older people and people with severe chronic health conditions, such as heart disease, lung disease, and diabetes”) **we encourage you to remain at home.** We want you to feel released to do what is needed to protect your health. We will miss you, but we will understand.

As a reminder for all of us ...

If you are coughing, sneezing or have a fever, do not come to church that day. Please place a sneeze or cough into your arm when around other people. Let's all wash our hands frequently (and thoroughly – 20 to 30 seconds of washing). It's okay not to shake hands, but maybe just a touch on the sleeve is good until we've passed this cold and flu season.

This is a troubling time. Jesus told us that “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33b) We need to take preventative measures. We need to make informed decisions. But most of all, we need to pray – for God’s protection over each of us, for guidance and protection for the medical personnel, for an end to this virus, and most importantly, that this will be used to draw us ever closer to Him.

Yours in Christ,

Pastors Melissa & Leo

From District Executive Minister, Gene Hagenberger:

Dear Mid-Atlantic district pastors and congregational leaders,

My prayers are with you for health, strength, and wisdom as you minister and lead in this challenging time.

For those of you who may be looking for recommendations on how to respond to the threat of coronavirus I would offer the following:

In Maryland, Governor Larry Hogan has banned gatherings of 250 or more people, which applies to religious services. That technically affects one of our 59 congregations, the Frederick congregation. The great majority of our congregations will have less than 250 persons in attendance. Schools in Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and the District of Columbia will be closed for at least two weeks beginning this coming Monday. While our congregations often follow schools in making decisions about closing due to inclement weather, a correlation does not necessarily apply in this situation.

Five states plus the District of Columbia are part of Mid-Atlantic district, and not all are following the same procedures. I recommend that pastors and congregational leaders communicate and make decisions about meeting or closing based on consideration and caring for the best interests of the members of the congregation and the wider community. Certainly those decisions should follow the guidelines of state and local authorities. I can tell you that Frederick CoB will be closed this Sunday and will be undergoing a "deep cleaning" in the coming week, with the staff planning for how the congregation may resume worship for multiple groups of less than 250 persons. Another district congregation will be closed this Sunday and undergoing a "deep cleaning," with the leadership team subsequently deciding upon whether to remain closed or resume services.

Attached are links to Mid-Atlantic state sites with recommendations for responding to coronavirus. In making decisions about remaining open or closing I encourage us to remember that some members of our congregations will want be in worship whenever the doors are open, and these may be senior members who are most vulnerable to the effects of the virus. Certainly, anyone who feels sick in any way, should "look to the interests of others" (Ph 2:4), and not attend services. People with heart disease, diabetes, or lung disease are most vulnerable to coronavirus, and should avoid public gatherings. We should avoid shaking hands, or hugging. I have serious concerns about us observing the Love Feast as usual until this crisis is abated. If there is an outbreak of coronavirus in any of our communities I believe that is an indication we should take more seriously suspending services for a time.

This could be a time to expand online and streaming worship. I ask any of our congregations who are making worship available online to let the office know so we can invite the wider district to avail themselves of such opportunities until this threat is past. This is also a time for our ministers and deacons to pay attention to phone ministries and to stay in touch with people, especially our homebound and senior members, as they may especially need connection with and the encouragement of the church at this time.

Some of you will remember that in the midst of the Great Depression FDR counseled the country that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Every time we turn on the TV or radio we hear "coronavirus," the number of people who have contracted the virus, and the number of people who have

died. It produces fear. I call us to remember that Jesus' most frequent exhortation was "Don't be afraid," and that the Bible reminds us that "God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of self-discipline" (2 Tim 1:7). Let us remember that we are in God's good hands. It will be ok. Let us do what we can to care for ourselves, and others, and let us pray for God's care and insight, the health and strength of the scientists, physicians, and health care providers around the world who will be working on our behalf.

Together on the Journey,

Gene Hagenberger

Mid-Atlantic District Executive Minister