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The Danger in Social Distancing

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Psalm 100, 2 Corinthians 4:7-10

With the coronavirus spreading, we are wise to practice social distancing. But do not fall into isolation, which can lead to despair.

The coronavirus is afflicting us, perplexing us and even striking some of us down. Schools are closing, restaurants are shutting down and congregations are no longer gathering for worship. Stress, anxiety and fear are being felt in homes across our country and around the world.

Coronavirus is a real threat, and people exposed to the virus are being advised to self-quarantine. In addition, everyone is being asked to maintain physical distance from others to control the spread of the virus. But there is danger in social distancing.

At Christ Church in Washington, D.C., the rector has fallen ill and been hospitalized with COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019). The mayor of D.C. issued a public health advisory urging the rector's 500 worshipers to self-quarantine for 14 days, and worship services at Christ Church have been canceled for the foreseeable future.

According to *The Washington Post* (https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/for-georgetown-churchgoers-a-coronavirus-self-quarantine-is-embraced-as-necessary/2020/03/10/3375c318-628c-11ea-845d-e35b0234b136_story.html), church members have decided to quarantine themselves voluntarily until the danger passes. Many feel a sense of duty to their neighbors and the public to do whatever they can to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

The congregation is "highly motivated," said church member Sally Wilhelm, a former health reporter for *The Washington Post*. "This is a population that has been involved in a lot of public service and cares a lot about the country." They are, in the words of Paul to the Corinthians, "afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair ... struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Corinthians 4:8-9).

Church members admit, however, that most of them are in the enviable position of having money and ample sick leave. They know that if they weren't getting paid while away from work, it would be much harder to self-quarantine.

In Italy, religious services have been suspended for weeks, in keeping with government rulings to curb the coronavirus. "The suspensions have generated some strange outcomes," reports *The New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/10/opinion/coronavirus-church-religion.html>). "Until this past weekend, the Milan Cathedral was open to tourists, but not to worshipers. Even weekday Mass was prohibited, even though it typically attracts smaller crowds than the average bar."

Italians have been told to watch offerings of Sunday Mass on local TV or online, even though a broadcast version of a service is not the same as a live version. Similar guidance is being given in Japan, South Korea and Iran. Saudi Arabia has taken the unprecedented step of suspending pilgrimages to the holy sites of Islam. Such restrictions are moving across the United States as well, as the virus spreads.

No one disputes "the need to strictly limit ritual gatherings and comply with public safety regulations," writes Mattia Ferraresi in *The New York Times*. "But for believers, religion is a fundamental source of spiritual healing and hope. It's a remedy against despair, providing psychological and emotional support that is an integral part of well-being." It is also an antidote to loneliness.

In worship, we are reminded that "the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture." When we give thanks to God and bless his name, we know that "the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations" (Psalm 100:3-5). The assurance that we are God's people and the sheep of God's pasture is a fundamental source of hope for us. God's steadfast love and faithfulness are a remedy against despair and the foundation of our well-being.

So how do we continue to worship and serve the Lord in a time of social distancing?

Online Worship

Congregations need to care for themselves and the wider community by taking steps to slow the spread of the virus. This means practicing good hygiene, refraining from hand-shaking, maintaining a physical distance from people in public, and avoiding large gatherings — including coming together in person for worship. By maintaining social distance on Sunday mornings, we are actually demonstrating that we love our neighbors as ourselves.

But moving to online worship is challenging. Not everyone is comfortable with worship by live-stream, YouTube, Zoom, Facebook Live or some other technology. We would rather be together in person than watching a service on a computer or smartphone.

Even with these challenges, we can have meaningful online worship by maintaining our normal order for worship. Church members need the certainty of established traditions in an uncertain time. Messages of comfort can provide psychological and emotional support. Prayers for strength and healing can lead to personal

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and communal well-being. Encouraging people to send their prayer concerns by email or phone can reduce isolation and build a sense of community, overcoming the danger of social distancing. Online services should also include Scripture and music, since we need the guidance and reassurance of all of our worship elements during this stressful time.

In addition, since people will want to support the mission and ministry of the church during a time of separation, guidance needs to be given on how people can mail their gifts to the church or make online offerings. Just a few Sundays without an offering can cripple the budgets of many congregations.

Mission to the Community

The closing of a church building does not mean that mission to the community has to cease. Concern for hungry neighbors has inspired Fairfax Presbyterian Church in Virginia to install "Little Free Pantries" outside their church building. These boxes used to be "Little Free Libraries" containing books for neighbors to borrow, read and return. But in this COVID-19 crisis, they have been repainted and repurposed.

Now, these "Little Free Pantries" contain canned goods and other non-perishable food, and hungry neighbors are welcome to come by and pick up food. Church members are encouraged to add contributions to the pantries at any time, and such mission efforts are a satisfying activity for parents who want to get out of the house with their children.

Mission to the community can continue, even in a time of social distancing. Yes, mission may take some unexpected forms, but it remains a sign of God's light in a dark world. "We have this treasure in clay jars," said the apostle Paul, "so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us" (2 Corinthians 4:7). Find the "clay jar" mission project that allows light to shine in your community.

Congregational Care

A public health crisis such as COVID-19 is an important time to be the church! Although church members are right to practice social distancing to prevent the spread of the virus, this is not the time to become isolated. Continue to reach out to fellow members and neighbors through phone calls, texts, emails and video chats. Activate the deacons or other caregivers in the church to make phone calls to older members in particular, since they might be particularly vulnerable to the danger of social distancing. Pastors should share their contact information widely, and let members know that they are happy to respond by email or telephone, and to meet in small groups as needed.

Paul's words have special significance for us in this time of COVID-19: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair ... struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies" (2 Corinthians 4:8-10). Yes, even in this time of being afflicted, perplexed and struck down, we can continue to trust in the Lord of steadfast love and faithfulness. The coronavirus does not have to crush us, drive us to despair or destroy us, because our powerful God is always working to heal us, help us and work for our well-being.

In addition, we are the body of Christ in the world today, and the life of Jesus can always be made visible in our bodies, through what we say and do. Jesus continues to live through us when we reach out with his love, in acts as simple as keeping in touch via phone calls and online communication. Even in a time of social distancing, we can continue to worship God and serve our neighbors, because Jesus himself has promised to be with us, to work through us, and to never let us go.

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