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Ministry in the midst of a COVID-19 outbreak

Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell

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I pastor a small church in Seattle, near the epicenter of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak just a few miles away in Kirkland, Wash. Presently, [ten assisted living facilities have reported](#) residents or employees testing positive for the virus. [Total deaths](#) are at 24 for King County, with the majority from the LifeCare center in Kirkland, and the official case count total is at 267. This will probably change by the time this article is published.

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On Monday, March 2, I was talking with friends about how excited I was to attend the Emerald City Comic Con originally scheduled for March 12-15, which draws almost 100,000 people. By Friday, March 5, [Comic Con in Seattle was postponed](#), and within twenty-four hours most churches in Seattle had cancelled in-person worship services, after [King County Public Health advised](#) against holding gatherings larger than 50 people.

When the first deaths were reported, my ecumenical and interfaith colleagues began to ask what we needed to do. A forum was held with the King County Public Health Department on March 3 at which we learned about [how novel coronavirus COVID-19 is spread](#): through droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes, between people who are in close contact (within 6 feet) of each other, or by touching an infected surface and then touching our eyes, mouth, or nose.

We discussed worship practices, such as how to greet one another without physical contact, changing our way of taking the offering so we aren't passing the plate, changing our communion practices, whether or not to serve food during coffee hour, and urging folks who are in the at-risk categories to stay home. We learned about [social distancing](#), and recognized that though for many of us, the symptoms might be mild, COVID-19 is so highly contagious that we would put others at risk. Things changed so quickly that the video recording of the forum was taken down within 24 hours, as the information was deemed obsolete.

As the news changes every day, I've made it a point to check the King County Public Health website daily. I read media releases from the CDC and steer clear of opinion pieces and blog posts unless I know the person directly. So much misinformation is being spread—that this is not as bad as the flu or the common cold, that this is a killer pandemic, and

everything in between. It is important to read factual, real-time information that comes from experts and authorities in public health.

After the forum, I contacted all the senior members of the congregation and those with underlying health concerns to make sure that they were okay, that they were safe, and that they understood the risks of COVID-19 and their age group and health concerns. Most of the seniors in my congregation live in assisted living facilities that have implemented strict procedures around visitors, and on March 10 Governor Jay Inslee instituted [new protocols](#) strictly limiting visitors in elder care facilities.

I sent email updates every other day to my congregation and posted updates via our social media. I acknowledged that we would change our worship practices including greeting time, that we were cleaning and sanitizing the building surfaces and doors and encouraging everyone to wash their hands or use hand sanitizer. I also encouraged anyone who had any cold symptoms or simply did not feel well to stay home. I listed the names of those I knew would not be attending worship for the foreseeable future and encouraged my congregation to call and send cards. By Saturday, March 7, I had to decide whether we would gather for worship Sunday. Determining that much of our membership was not in the at-risk categories, I decided to move forward with the service but that we would also stream it on Facebook Live.

Streaming worship brought a new set of questions and concerns. Did we have the right music license to cover streaming? We did not, so I quickly went online and purchased the license to cover the praise music we would be singing. Did we have permission to show people on video? I set up my tripod and made sure to just have me on the video (and my son, for the Children's Message). I made sure to let our congregation know that they were more than welcome to participate from home, and that they could also give online (and I checked the link to our Square account to make sure it worked).

I've been asked what it is like to live and minister in Seattle right now. It's a strange dystopian feel. All the major companies including Microsoft, Amazon, and Boeing have sent their employees home for two weeks. Food truck workers that

make their wages off Amazon employees are struggling for business. All conferences and events have been cancelled. Traffic has been light. My husband, who drives for Lyft, has seen business drop significantly. Our family relies on his income for living in Seattle.

However, the coffee shops still have customers. The stores are still busy. Hand sanitizer has not been restocked yet, although toilet paper has. Most of the major companies have stepped up to pay their hourly workers their full time despite whether they work their full hours or not, given the circumstances. The public discourse on paid sick leave has changed as many wonder if they can remain employed, and [bills are being introduced](#) in Congress regarding sick leave and pay during emergencies.

Though we have canceled most of our events, we have maintained our commitment to our local youth shelter. We have developed a new partnership with New Horizons Ministries, reaching homeless youth in Seattle. Our team of six healthy adults who were not in the at-risk categories prepared, cooked, and served a meal to youth in need. The director told our team that many of their volunteer teams, coordinated through Amazon and Microsoft and other companies, have canceled. But folks who are experiencing homelessness are still living on the streets. They still need food. Ministries are stretched thin right now. For those of us who are able, we are doing what we can to serve Christ in our community through service to others.

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I do not know if we will have worship in person this Sunday. The governor or public health office could issue new guidelines. If someone in our congregation or our building

(which includes all who use our building) tests positive for COVID-19, we will have to close the building to clean and sanitize. Anyone who was in contact with that individual or in the same space is advised to self-isolate for 14 days. We are currently at [Level 2](#) of the King County Public Health Response. If we get to level 4, we will be ordered to cancel.

This is the reality in which I minister. I cannot visit any of the seniors in my congregation who currently live in assisted living or nursing facilities. I cannot visit the family with a child who has a compromised immune system.

I can call, text, and send cards, and encourage others to do so. I can pray for my congregation, especially those at-risk. I can pray for those who are sick. I can pray for those who have lost loved ones and know that the number is going to increase. I can keep myself informed with the up-to-date data and procedures outlined by government officials. I can still live and minister in Seattle, even if it is different.

Most importantly, I can keep myself from large crowds of people, so I can limit my exposure to COVID-19 and help stop its spread. I can wash my hands and stay home if I am sick.

The Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell is pastor of Queen Anne Baptist Church, Seattle, Wash., and ministry associate of social media for the Evergreen Association of American Baptist Churches USA. For resources on COVID-19 for churches, visit [Coronavirus Information](#).

The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of American Baptist Home Mission Societies.



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