

A Pastoral Statement on the Coronavirus/COVID-19

At a time of high anxiety — such as the global outbreak of coronavirus/COVID-19 — pastors and other congregational leaders have an important role in setting an appropriate tone for the church's response. Leaders can demonstrate that they are taking seriously the facts of the situation and keeping the best interests of the community in mind. At the same time, they can model a response that is faithful, gracious and wise — trusting God in all things, remaining calm in a time of distress, extending compassion to those who are suffering, and praying for the healing of the world.

With these things in mind, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Theology and Worship offers the following pastoral statement. These words may be adapted for an announcement at the opening of a worship service or for other forms of communication, such as emails, newsletters or social media.

- With reports about the spread of the coronavirus (or COVID-19), we want you to know that the health of our community is of utmost concern to the pastor(s), session and staff of this congregation. We are doing all that we can to stay current with public health guidelines, follow best practices for hygiene, and exercise an abundance of caution and care in responding to this situation. [This may include extra supplies of hand sanitizer and facial tissue, new procedures for sharing food and fellowship, and other efforts to keep church facilities clean and safe.]
- Worshipers are always encouraged to participate, or not, according to their comfort, conscience and condition. Other worshipers should honor these decisions and refrain from making judgment or taking offense. Folding one's arms across the chest and smiling or nodding can be a gracious way to decline physical contact in greeting lines or other public encounters.
- ***The next two points may be included at the discretion of the pastor and session, according to current conditions in your community.***
 - Since passing the peace is a particular concern at this time, instead of shaking hands or embracing, we will ... [options include a verbal greeting, a unison spoken or musical response, or other gestures such as an elbow bump, smile or bow; see the link to "Preparedness for Pandemics" below]. This is another way to express Christ's call to reconciliation in the church and world.
 - We have also modified our communion practices ... [options include extra precautions in preparing the bread and wine/juice, not using a common loaf or cup, having only servers handle the bread, and different manners of distributing the elements; see the link to "Preparedness for Pandemics" below]. These are expressions of our care for the people of God as the body of Christ.
- Use common sense and your best judgment in protecting your own health and the health of others. Reduce unnecessary travel, touch and contact to avoid placing yourself or others at greater risk. If you are feeling ill or have recently experienced symptoms of an infectious disease, we ask that you stay home from public events and/or keep a safe distance from others to limit contagion. Even if you believe you are not sick, but are coughing or sneezing, be mindful of the anxiety this may cause in others around you.

- If you decide to stay home from worship or other events due to illness, please find ways to stay in touch — through prayer circles, small groups, ministry teams, social media, or emails and phone calls. We don't want to create situations where those who are ill also feel lonely, isolated or outcast. We want to pray for you and provide other forms of assistance and care as needed.
- Let us be faithful and vigilant in our prayer for those nations, communities, families and individuals most affected by this outbreak, and for the medical personnel and government officials seeking to respond. Let us resist and reject fear and suspicion based on ethnicity or nationality; this virus is affecting people of all races and ages. Let us be generous in supporting organizations that provide assistance and support public health in our area and around the world.
- Above all, let us remember and rejoice that “nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (*Brief Statement of Faith*; Rom. 8:38–39).

For more detailed guidance, please see the excellent Presbyterian Disaster Assistance resource titled [Preparedness for Pandemics](#). For insights on spiritual care, see [Light Our Way](#), an ecumenical guidebook provided by the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters.

Some elements of this statement are adapted, with gratitude, from a letter by Rev. Dr. Steven T. Yamaguchi and Dr. Peter Mathies at Tokyo Union Church in Tokyo, Japan.