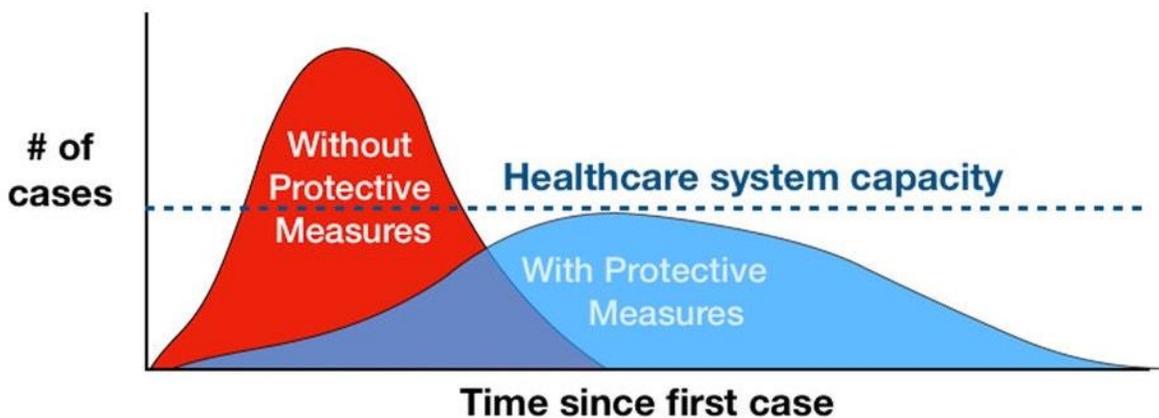


Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As concern about the COVID-19 outbreak spreads, we in ECMN are offering guidance and recommendations that seek to ensure personal health, public health, and pastoral care.

Although for most people the illness poses low risk, for the elderly, immunocompromised, and vulnerable, it can be deadly. We owe it to our congregations and neighbors to take precautions to protect the vulnerable among us, and to “flatten the curve”: to slow the spread of this infection so as not to overwhelm our health care systems.



Adapted from CDC / The Economist

This week, I had the opportunity to talk with other bishops to gather recommendations for how to respond to the disease. On Thursday afternoon I convened a group of Subject Matter Experts from around Minnesota who have given me some important suggestions.

First, please know that I support faith communities choosing to alter worship, cancel services, make changes to liturgy and/or faith community operations.

Second, as you make decisions based on what is best for your faith community, I ask you to consider that the actions we take now will affect the reality that we see 2-4 weeks from now. We cannot stop the spread of this illness, but actions that we take today can slow its spread and perhaps curtail its severity.

Additionally, based on the counsel I have received, the following mandates apply to all faith communities in ECMN until further notice:

- At the peace, congregants should greet one another without physical touch of any kind

- Offering plates are not to be passed
- Safe social distance should be maintained during gatherings
- Communion is to be distributed in the form of consecrated bread only
- All large gatherings should be cancelled, rescheduled, or moved online. Consider proximity and density when making these decisions--how many people will be in a room, and how big is the room?

Please know that I will be in close contact with Missioners and local experts to monitor this situation as it unfolds.

As you seek to make decisions and create plans in your faith community, I have several resources that I commend to you:

- There is a webinar scheduled for Friday March 13th at 10am. [Click here to register for it](#) (or check out episcopalmn.org/covid19-response to find a post of the recording).
- We have created a Facebook group intended for clergy and lay leaders to share questions and resources and problem-solve together. [Join it by clicking here](#).
- As you make plans for how you might operate at your faith community, [find a planning resource here](#).

Recommendations for our Common Life

As faith communities seek to plan for all areas of their common life, I offer some best practices, ideas, and recommendations compiled from many different dioceses and reviewed and approved by our local experts:

Personal Health

Follow, and urge all of your parishioners to follow, all CDC and MN Department of Health guidelines around handwashing, not touching one's face, social distancing, etc. [See those guidelines here](#).

Public Health

The suggestions below are designed to promote public health. Once again, we are called as Christians to care for the whole family of God's people. Taking proactive action to slow the spread of this illness will ensure that our most vulnerable neighbors are protected, and will help prevent the overwhelm of our medical care facilities.

Sunday Worship

- Where possible, begin livestreaming your services to make them accessible to community members who feel uncomfortable attending in person. See livestream information and resources below.
- You may offer morning prayer instead of Eucharist to avoid some high-touch aspects of Eucharist, or offer morning prayer as an alternative for vulnerable populations.
- If you choose to conduct a Eucharist, the following recommendations apply:
 - At the offertory, the entire altar party should wash their hands for 20 seconds with hot, soapy water, before setting the table for Communion. Hand sanitizer may also be used. Please caution the altar party not to touch their faces, and to rewash if they touch their faces, cough, sneeze, or use a tissue.
 - Do not pass the offering plates. Instead, place them somewhere accessible and allow worshipers to place their offerings within.
 - The passing of the peace should exclude touch of any kind. Waves, peace signs, and bows of the head are acceptable alternatives.
 - Position hand sanitizer near all communion stations, and ask all congregants to use it before receiving the host.
 - Ask congregants to keep hands flat while receiving the host, and to avoid touching the priest's or deacon's hands.
 - Consider asking people not to kneel during communion so that worshipers can avoid touching the altar rail.
 - Halt the serving of the common cup.
 - Use wafers rather than a loaf of bread for the serving of the host.
 - Cancel services entirely if you deem it necessary in your context.

Other Services

- Weddings, funerals, and other services may be held as deemed appropriate and safe. Please observe all above-stated mandates, and please consider canceling large gatherings.
- Consider alternate practices for Holy Week. For Maundy Thursday footwashing, the practice could be symbolic, washing the feet of only one or two people. For Good Friday, discourage reverencing the cross by touching or kissing it; encourage a bow or a kneeling prayer instead.

Food Service

- Consider fasting from coffee hour for the remainder of Lent. It's theologically appropriate and helps slow the spread of germs from food that is handled by many people.

For **feeding ministries** for those in need in your community:

- Do not allow food to be self-served; instead have all food served in individual containers, or by food servers wearing gloves. Only the servers should handle the serving pieces.
- Wash all dishes in a dishwasher rather than by hand, as the water heats to higher temperatures and the dishwasher cleans more thoroughly. Use paper goods if you do not have a dishwasher in the church.

Cleaning and Sanitization of Surfaces

- Remove holy water from fonts and stoups and sanitize them. Some congregations have chosen to fill the fonts instead with sand during Lent, as a symbol of Jesus' sojourn in the desert.
- Before worship or any type of gathering, go over door handles, pew tops, restroom handles, locks, and faucets, and the altar rail with cloths and a household cleaner containing at least 60% alcohol.
- Repeat the cleaning of those areas after each service or gathering.

Operations & Building Use

- Convene your vestry or bishop's committee to consider how to implement these recommendations. You may find the planning document linked above helpful.
- Anyone who feels the least bit sick should stay home. There are no employees or lay ministers so essential that the faith community cannot adjust.
- Consider allowing staff who are able to work remotely.
- Office and day school staff should be given paid sick leave if they are ill, or if they have reason to believe they have been exposed to the virus.
- Where possible, vestry and staff meetings can be held remotely.
- It is up to each faith community whether and how to remain open for use by community groups such as daycares, 12-step groups, etc. Leadership should work closely with those groups to ensure that all possible care is taken, and that all above guidelines are closely followed.

Travel

- It is advisable to cancel all trips for the next several weeks. Consider the likelihood that travel will increase your risk of exposure and quarantine.
- For planned summer trips for faith community groups, watch the news carefully and cancel travel plans if quarantines continue. Feel free to contact ECMN for support and help making a decision.

Pastoral Care

I encourage you to use this time as an opportunity to exercise creativity in your worship and communal life. Though we are challenged by these circumstances, this is also an opportunity to explore what is possible, with the Way of Jesus as our guiding principle and new technological capacities to support our life together.

- Create a phone tree and/or email list. Work to get in touch with every member of your congregation. Inform them that we recommend that those who are elderly, immunocompromised, or have underlying health conditions stay home from worship. Share with them ways to participate in Sunday worship virtually, and promise to stay in touch. Plan to check on your members who stay home periodically over the next few weeks using the

phone tree. Help them know that even when they are not physically present for worship, we care about them as part of our beloved community.

- Cancel non-essential pastoral visits for now. Restrict home and hospital visits to extreme cases. Substitute phone chats and pray with people over the phone. Many hospitals, nursing homes, and care facilities are implementing visitor restrictions. Please check with those institutions before you go.
- Set up phone calls and video chats with homebound parishioners.
- Consider creating a ministry to deliver groceries and other essentials to quarantined members. Bring groceries and supplies to those who are ill or quarantined and leave them on the doorstep.
- Prepare home Sunday school lessons for children and Bible studies for adults, and make them available by email or video for those who choose to stay home.
- Encourage your members to get to know their neighbors at home. In a time of quarantine or illness, neighbors caring for neighbors is an ideal way that we can care for all of God's people.
- See the excellent article linked below on how to care for your flock and for yourself at this time.

Blessings on you as you lead in this time of anxiety. May we be people of hope, may we walk the way of Jesus, finding the creativity, graciousness, and energy necessary to love others well and figure out what it might look like to be the Beloved Community, even here and now.

Resources

Stay educated on the situation. The situation around COVID-19 is changing quickly. Stay informed with good information:

Minnesota Department of Health

[has a main page](#) that is constantly being updated with information specific to cases and response to the situation here in Minnesota.

Centers for Disease Control

[Helpful resources for faith community leaders.](#)
[A pandemic preparedness checklist.](#)

The Episcopal Church

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has released two statements, and The Episcopal Church has [curated resources that can be found here.](#)

Episcopal Relief and Development

[Offers great resources for faith leaders that we would commend to you.](#)

If your faith community is looking at utilizing **online platforms** to host meeting and stream services, here are some resources to help.

The Diocese of Chicago created **[a resource for offering online worship.](#)**
The Diocese of San Diego put together **[a video to help those looking to livestream.](#)**

And, maybe more important than all of this, **[find here an article](#)** focusing on how we, as leaders of faith, can provide pastoral presence to ourselves and to one another in the midst of this situation.

Blessings on you as you lead in this time of anxiety. May we be people of hope, may we walk the way of Jesus, finding the creativity, graciousness and energy necessary to love others well and figure out what it might look like to be the Beloved Community, even here and now.

In the words of Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, "We're in this together. [. . .] God love you. God bless you. May God hold us all in those almighty hands of love."

Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the initials 'BP' in a stylized, cursive script.

Rt. Rev. Brian N. Prior
IX Bishop of the Episcopal Church in Minnesota