

**NEW YORK STATE COUNCIL OF CHURCHES  
CORONA-VIRUS GUIDE  
FOR  
PASTORAL LEADERS, JUDICATORIES AND CONGREGATIONS  
Updated March 17, 2020**

With the Covid-19 pandemic bearing down on the globe, New York has one of the highest concentrations of cases in the United States. Given the swirl of pronouncements, orders, legislation and advice, we offer the following guidance and observations. The New York State Council of Churches has prepared this guide for churches and judicatories.

The guide reflects our review of statements and guidance of our denominational, governmental, and advocacy partners. We are also monitoring emerging laws, executive orders, and legislation to deal with the crisis. Please bring to our attention any updates or critiques, and we will seek to modify the guide as the number of reported cases undoubtedly will continue to expand.

Our communication is a communal process. This is also a moment where churches need to exercise good leadership in the public square. Stay well informed about emerging public policy, advocate accordingly, and reach out to their communities. Remember, your parish is your neighborhood and city and not just who is in your four walls.

According to the Wisconsin Council of Churches:

*“Churches around the world are learning how to be imaginative in their ministry in order to be present to those in need in a time of social disruption. From the experiences of communities facing crises around the world, we know that faith leaders can play a transformational role in calming fear, disseminating accurate information, and modifying religious practices to help keep people safe while providing spiritual care and honoring important community traditions.*

*We see our role as churches, leaders, and compassionate Christians as:*

- *Combating fear with knowledge in order to encourage preparedness and decrease stigma*
- *maintaining operational continuity and continuing expressions of Christian life in the case of quarantine and disruption*
- *showing God’s compassion and care to those in our communities who are affected*

If you have not already done so, you might consider forming at your church and/or judicatory, a COVID response team who can review ecclesiastical and government recommendations, and be in touch with various entities and denominational leaders to discern action steps and what can profitably shared with your congregations.

## PRAYERS AND REFLECTIONS

The Corona Virus reminds us of the communal aspects of our faith where we bear one another's burdens and care for any one who has need.

### **The book of Acts 2:43 TO 47 reminds us that**

*"Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."*

A more secular reflection which mirrors the counsel in the book of Acts can draw on our traditions of caring for the poor and bearing each other's be found in this [Messaging Guide](#) published by the [Million Voters Project](#), a coalition of 7 statewide and regional community organizing networks: [A APIs for Civic Engagement](#), [Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment](#), [California Calls](#), [Coalition for the Humane Immigrant Rights](#), Orange County Civic Engagement Table, [PICO California](#) and [Power California](#).

## PRAYERS

*God is our refuge in the storm, and will be with us no matter what happens. When we pray, we can give thanks for that comforting presence, growing ever closer to God in hard times. We can also ask for strength to take the necessary steps and health precautions.*

*Below is a prayer for this moment from retired Lutheran Bishop Martin Wells. (You may also appreciate this [litany from America: The Jesuit Review](#).)*

*God of healing and hope; in Jesus you meet us in our places of pain and fear. Look with mercy on those who have contracted the new virus, on any who are vulnerable, and on all who feel in danger. Through this time of global concern, by your Holy Spirit bring out the best not the worst in us. Make us more aware of our interdependence on each other, and of the strength that comes from being one body in you. Through Christ our wounded healer, Amen.*

Faithful America team

Prayer for a Pandemic prepared by St. Mary's Academy in Portland, offered by Bishop John Macholz, Upstate New York Synod, ELCA

*May we who are merely inconvenienced  
Remember those whose lives are at stake.*

*May we who have no risk factors  
Remember those most vulnerable.*

*May we who have the luxury of working from home  
Remember those who must choose between preserving their health or making their rent.*

*May we who have the flexibility to care for our children when their schools close  
Remember those who have no options.*

*May we who have to cancel our trips  
Remember those that have no safe place to go.*

*May we who are losing our margin money in the tumult of the economic market  
Remember those who have no margin at all.*

*May we who settle in for a quarantine at home  
Remember those who have no home.*

*As fear grips our country,  
Let us choose love.*

*During this time when we cannot physically wrap our arms around each other, let us yet find  
ways to be the loving embrace of God to our neighbors.*

*Amen.*

St. Mary's Academy, Portland.

## **BASIC ADVICE AND FEDERAL AND STATE COMMUNICATIONS**

### **Center for Disease Control**

Peter Guditis, Executive Director of New York Disaster Interfaith Services reminds us that the [Center for Disease Control Corona Virus website](#) – is the best source for up-to-date information and guidance

### **Guidance from President Trump**

President Trump issued on March 16 the following: Coronavirus Guidelines for America: 15 Days to Slow the Spread:

1. Listen to and follow the directions of your state and local authorities.
2. If you feel sick, stay home. Do not go to work. Contact your medical provider.
3. If your children are sick, keep them at home. Do not send them to school. Contact your medical provider.
4. If someone in your household has tested positive for the coronavirus, keep the entire household at home. Do not go to work. Do not go to school. Contact your medical provider.
5. If you are an older person, stay home and away from other people.
6. If you are a person with a serious underlying health condition that can put you at increased risk (for example, a condition that impairs your lung or heart function or weakens your immune system), stay home and away from other people.
7. Even if you are young, or otherwise healthy, you are at risk and your activities can increase the risk for others. It is critical that you do your part to stop the spread of the coronavirus:

- a. Work or engage in schooling from home whenever possible.
- b. If you work in a critical infrastructure industry, as defined by the Department of Homeland Security, such as healthcare services and pharmaceutical and food supply, you have a special responsibility to maintain your normal work schedule. You and your employers should follow CDC guidance to protect your health at work.
- c. Avoid social gatherings in groups of more than 10 people.
- d. Avoid eating or drinking in bars, restaurants, and food courts – use drive-thru, pickup, or delivery options.
- e. Avoid discretionary travel, shopping trips, and social visits.
- f. Do not visit nursing homes or retirement or long-term care facilities unless to provide critical assistance.

8. Practice good hygiene:

- a. Wash your hands, especially after touching any frequently used item or surface.
- b. Avoid touching your face.
- c. Sneeze or cough into a tissue, or the inside of your elbow.
- d. Disinfect frequently used items and surfaces as much as possible.

\* School operations can accelerate the spread of the coronavirus. Governors of states with evidence of community transmission should close schools in affected and surrounding areas. Governors should close schools in communities that are near areas of community transmission, even if those areas are in neighboring states. In addition, state and local officials should close schools where coronavirus has been identified in the population associated with the school. States and localities that close schools need to address childcare needs of critical responders, as well as the nutritional needs of children.

\*\* Older people are particularly at risk from the coronavirus. All states should follow Federal guidance and halt social visits to nursing homes and retirement and long-term care facilities.

\*\*\* In states with evidence of community transmission, bars, restaurants, food courts, gyms, and other indoor and outdoor venues where groups of people congregate should be closed.

## **ACCESS TO TESTING AND HEALTH CARE**

If a parishioner is sick or displays symptoms of Corona Virus, they should stay home but also reach out to their doctor for advice and to determine if they should be tested. Advocate for any one who might have trouble accessing their insurance benefits which are owed to them or find costs unbearable because underinsurance.

We urge you to be in touch with parishioners regarding their health insurance and the care they receive at this time. Many are either under insured or have no insurance. Families First Coronavirus Response Act which was passed by the House of Representatives and is pending action in the Senate along with other aid packages, provides for some health benefits including free testing for Corona virus. The Governor has instructed health insurance companies to not charge co-pays for remote doctor consultations.

As pastors, be advised that the Federal Government will likely send to New York a significant increase in Medicaid subsidy. This is welcome news considering that state lawmakers have been contemplating a significant cut in Medicaid and shifting the cost to counties. Cuts contemplated which we are working to prevent from going into effect, include financial assistance to home care givers to prevent people from having to go to more expensive nursing homes which now have visitation moratorium due to the virus. Moreover, Federal guidelines prohibit the state government from cost shifting to the counties as was contemplated. Here is an article from the [Buffalo News](#) outlining some of the public policies around Medicaid which could affect your parishioners and your neighborhood, city and county. [Newsday](#) recently published an article concerning the economic stresses experienced by counties in Long Island.

Call your elected representatives for assistance and case management and use the [Families First Coronavirus Response Act](#) for reference.

### **PAID SICK LEAVE, FOOD ASSISTANCE, UNEMPLOYMENT**

Check in to be sure parishioners have access to paid sick leave and access to childcare and food. The United States Congress passed sick leave provisions and expanded unemployment insurance, provision for a parent to stay home if the school of their children is closed, and relief for businesses and the self-employed. Again, refer to the [Families First Coronavirus Response Act](#). It is worth noting that the Response Act, with regard to sick leave, only applies to companies under 500 people. Companies under 50 employees can apply for a hardship exemption. These rules would suggest only about 20% of our population is covered under this legislation.

Given the short comings in the Federal bill, state lawmakers are considering passing their own sick leave bill to address the Corona virus and to have a more permanent provision for sick leave in place once the virus subsides. Remember the already scaled back Federal law is time limited. There may, however, be other stimulus bills being passed on the Federal level.

### **CHURCH CLOSINGS AND WORSHIP ONLINE**

Denominations have offered a variety of guidelines regarding church closings. As of yesterday, however, Center of Disease Control now recommends people not attend gatherings more than 50 except in schools and places of business. The President now recommends gatherings of no more than 10. Given increasing restrictions, church services should not take place.

Given these restrictions, you should consider conducting digital or phone based worship gatherings. The Wisconsin Council of Churches offers these [Resources for Streaming Worship](#) and a webinar on March 24 [Creating Live-Streamed Worship from 1 to 2 Central Time](#). Your denomination may also conduct a region wide digital worship service. For instance, the Episcopal Diocese of Central New York plans to hold a service on March 22.

Faithful America commends this article *“from Sojourners, ‘[Community Without Communing: Resources for Virtual Church](#).’ You might also appreciate TechSoup’s ‘[How to Broadcast a Facebook Live Event in 5 Easy Steps](#).’ (To make sure non-Facebook users can watch your live event, read Facebook’s own instructions on [embedding their videos onto your website](#).) Smaller churches might consider something like [FreeConferenceCall.com](#) for a simple audio-only prayer service.*

*If you are non-denominational, take advantage of the public materials from other churches, including [the Episcopal Church](#), [Presbyterian Disaster Assistance](#), [the United Methodist Church](#), [the United Church of Christ](#) and the [Catholic Archdiocese of Washington](#).”*

## **FUNERALS**

You may need to postpone funerals, restrict funerals to family only or, as was recently suggested by the Board of Rabbis, do outside and graveside services.

## **PRISONS AND THE INCARCERATED CHURCH**

For the moment, Department of Corrections and Community Supervision has not asked chaplains to leave work. They must, however, scale back on many of their activities with prisoners. Please check in with your prison chaplain to offer any support consistent with DOCCS guidelines. In addition, family and clergy cannot visit parishioners in state prisons until further notice. The only exceptions are visits from legal counsel who can confer with clients behind glass.

In addition, inmates will be able to receive five (5) free stamps per week for use in accordance with [Directive #4422](#), “Inmate Correspondence Program,”

Two (2) free secure messages per week via electronic tablet, and One (1) free phone call per week in accordance with [Directive #4423](#) “Inmate Telephone Calls.”

For the moment, New York City jails have not imposed these restrictions.

Needless to say both prisoners and employees are particularly vulnerable to an outbreak of the virus. There are efforts under way to try to reduce populations in prisons for elderly prisoners by asking the Governor to grant clemency. We also do not want to see population increases in jails by new restrictions on the current law of bail and discovery and we will endeavor to not have Albany modify the law.

Here is also [petition](#) to the Governor regarding prison labor, clemency and bail reform.

[Human Rights Watch](#) has also published policy recommendations on the Coronavirus and incarceration.

## **NURSING HOMES**

For those who wish to visit parishioners in extended care facilities, the Governor has banned these visits for the time being. You will need to find other ways to stay in touch with residents including phone calls and video conferencing. Call the facility to ask for guidance and ascertain what accommodations can be offered at this time. If you have an IT person on your judicatory staff or in your congregation who could help isolated people access online communication platforms, please do so. Please also be aware of Medicaid funding issues for long term care which your parishioners might be encountering.

## **HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS**

With regard all housing and homeless concerns, be advised that housing courts are closed across the state indefinitely beginning on Tuesday, March 17. Be on the look out for anyone facing eviction or is precariously housed and act as best you can.

At present, we are urging passage of the Home Stability Support which will keep people in their homes which is safer, more stable and less expensive than having to rely on homeless shelters. Please call the Governor and your Member of the Assembly and State Senator and urge them to pass Home Stability Support.

## **IMMIGRANTS**

Immigrants in your congregation and community might be particularly vulnerable. Speak forthrightly against any blame for the COVID19 crisis which might be placed on people because of their race, economic status or national origin. Ensure that everyone knows they can access free testing regardless of whether they have insurance. Comprehensive health care for undocumented immigrants is better in New York City by calling **311** but no one in any part of the state should be turned away for testing or have to bear any cost for that testing. The Families First Corona Virus Response Act does not allow for discrimination based on immigration status.

The New Sanctuary Coalition of New York is saying that thousands are still reporting to ICE, attending immigration hearings, and being detained in jails around the nation without access to necessary and proper health care and preventative equipment and measures. This week, ICE announced that they would be banning "social visitation" in detention facilities. This move will only further isolate human beings who should not be detained in the first place, keeping them from staying in touch with their loved ones.

Please go to New Sanctuary Coalition for more guidance and how you can help including offering accompaniment. The [Gothamist](#) is reporting increased encounters with ICE at airports where family are apprehended while delivering loved ones to the airport to return back to their countries of origin.

## **WORKING FROM HOME, REACHING CHURCH STAFF, AND PASTORAL CARE STRATEGIES**

If at all possible, have your employees work from home but ensure your parishioners know how to be in touch with them. If you have not done so already, update your call systems at church with clear instructions on how those who call can locate a staff person and with provision to leave a confidential voice mail so people do not have to leave a message on the general answering machine.

## **FORM A CORONA VIRUS RESPONSE TEAM**

**Judicatories and congregations, if they have not already done so, could set up Corona Virus Response Teams**

1. Set up phone trees or online vehicles of communication to stay in touch with people who might be socially isolated, homebound or in institutions (prisons, nursing homes etc.)
2. Ascertain whether people need food and/or help with child care. Urge your parishioners not to hoard supplies at supermarkets and share, when possible, with others.
3. Communicate with denominational leadership
4. Monitor government communications regarding the crisis and speak out on legislation and policy as needed.
5. Reach out to local food pantries and shelters to ascertain needs and to offer volunteers, donations, money as appropriate. Please refer to [Families First Coronavirus Response Act](#) for more description of the various forms of food assistance available.

## **HELPING BUSINESSES**

Restrictions are being placed on local businesses and employers. Sports clubs, nightclubs, movie theaters, small theater houses and concert venues are closed. Cafes and bars are limited to take out only. Reach out to your local businesses and encourage people to patronize them to the degree that is possible given gathering restrictions.

## **COLLEGE STUDENTS**

For college students, their dorms are closing and they are asked to go home. For international students, this might be difficult to do. Also be aware that some students may find themselves homeless. You might look for ways to reach out to young people and offer a room, food, study space, and other assistance.

## **COLLEGIALITY, SELF CARE AND MENTAL HEALTH**

Pastors and chaplains should make an effort to confer with one another and not socially isolate. If you are a pastor, call your chaplains at care facilities and prisons and ask them how it is going and if they need help. This would be a good time to get better acquainted with your colleagues for support if you have not already done so. Judicatories may also organize support calls for clergy.

### **Take care of your mental health, and check in on others in need.**

It is just as important to take seriously the coming mental and emotional toll as it is to take seriously the coronavirus itself. This is a time to live our values and care for one another.

Call your loved ones. Talk to your pastor about setting up a phone tree so that isolated parishioners can receive a friendly phone call each day. Be kind to overworked retail staff. Stand up to the anti-Asian racism that's spreading alongside all the fake news.

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention has five suggestions for "[Taking Care of Your Mental Health in the Face of Uncertainty.](#)"

Pastors may appreciate *Christian Century's* "[10 guidelines for pastoral care during the coronavirus outbreak.](#)"

And all of us can take heart from [quarantined Italian neighborhoods singing together from their windows](#), and from this article in the *Seattle Times*: "[Coronavirus sparks an epidemic of people helping people in Seattle.](#)"

## **SCHOOL CLOSINGS AND CHILD CARE**

Many of your parishioners will have to stay home with their children because school is closed. The Federal government offers up to 14 days of paid leave to allow parents to stay home with their kids. Be aware, however, that there may be need for child care and enrichment activities and that the [Families First Coronavirus Response Act](#) has a lot of gaps in coverage. This would be a good time to ask your legislator about child care and paid sick leave provisions in the state budget.

Many school districts are providing take out breakfast and lunch. Contact your school district. Again, your church might offer other kinds of food assistance and child care.

## **CHURCH FINANCES**

If you have not done so already, this would be a good time to institute a tool for online contributions

If you have endowments or investments, you should confer with your investment advisor about your portfolio.

You may need dollars to expand compensation for a more rigorous cleaning protocol.

Remember reaching out to your parishioners and the community at large and doing good ministry, is also good financial practice in that you have your membership and community more closely identify with your institution because you have cared for them. As you become more generous with others they will be more generous with you. This is a moment when you can be the church at its best. People will want to invest in that sort of church. Pastors, this is a good opportunity to share the pastoral load with your lay leaders and volunteer groups.

Be on look out for people in your church who can give extra dollars or donate goods and services in kind to offset some drop in giving from parishioners experiencing financial uncertainty or hardship. Some might also be able and willing to pre-pay their pledges so you do not have to prematurely draw from investments or to make up for possible drops in giving.

The United States Congress and the state are actively considering additional financial stimulus packages. Have someone on your COVID Response Team monitor emerging legislation and recommend action.

## HELPFUL WEBSITES AND ARTICLES

1. Center for Disease Control <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>
2. State of New York Department of Health  
<https://health.ny.gov/diseases/communicable/coronavirus/>
3. Please contact your city and county health departments
4. Consult New York State Council of Churches at [WWW.Nyscoc.org](http://WWW.Nyscoc.org). The website includes updates on the Corona Virus Response and Suggestions on how you can act on legislation. Locate your regional and national denominational websites. A listing of sites can be found at [WWW.Nyscoc.org](http://WWW.Nyscoc.org).
5. News Articles

[\*New York Times coronavirus coverage\*](#) has been removed from behind the *Times'* paywall, making it free for all readers.

[\*\*"Covid-19 is not the flu. It's worse."\*\*](#) (Vox)

[\*\*"Worried about coronavirus? If your loved one is over 60, read this."\*\*](#) (CNN)

[\*\*"The Dos and Don'ts of 'Social Distancing.'"\*\*](#) (*The Atlantic*)

[\*\*"How canceled events and self-quarantines save lives, in one chart."\*\*](#) (Vox)

[\*\*"Here's how to avoid coronavirus scams."\*\*](#) (NBC News)