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Coronavirus Communication Plan Guidelines

—Approach—

Communication around the coronavirus should be a two-fold approach: pastoral and tactical. Communication should be pastoral because in a time of fear and crisis, people will need to be reminded that God is their refuge, strength, and ever-present help in times of trouble. Communication also should be tactical as people will want to know that there is a plan, and also be reassured that you are taking their health seriously.

Before you get into any discussions around pastoral and tactical communications, we recommend you take the following actions:

1. Get decision-making leaders together so everyone is on the same page. Don't try to "manage up."
2. Learn about the virus to help inform decisions. Don't let fear drive decisions—there is a lot of false information circulating.
 - a. www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html
 - b. www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus
3. Contact your state, county, and/or city health office as soon as possible. You want to them to know you exist as a church, and in the event of an outbreak for them to provide guidance.

—Tactical Questions—

Before you begin any form of tactical communication, ask your leaders the following questions:

- What does our cleaning/sanitation process currently look like?
 - Are all frequently touched surfaces involved in the cleaning process (doors, handles, water fountains, tables, sinks, check-in stations, touchscreens, etc.)?
 - Do we need to take extra cleaning measures?
- What will we need to do around service elements?
 - Will we stop Communion during this time?
 - Will we stop passing the offering buckets/plates (if applicable)?



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- Will we stop passing out bulletins/programs (if applicable)?
- Will we stop doing a greeting time (if applicable)?
- Are we asking our volunteers, door greeters, and welcome teams to refrain from shaking hands?
 - Are we asking them to frequently wash their hands?
- Do we refrain from offering coffee or other treats during this time?
- What does our cleaning/sanitation process look like for kid's rooms?
 - Are all frequently touched surfaces involved in the cleaning process (toys, doors, handles, water fountains, tables, sinks, check-in stations, touchscreens, etc.)?
 - Do we need to take extra cleaning measures?
- Are we visibly doing things that help people see cleanliness? (making hand sanitizer stations available, having staff/volunteers wipe surfaces while people are around, etc.).
- Do you have a plan if an individual in your congregation tests positive for the Coronavirus?
 - Do you take attendance of kids and volunteers, in case you need to reach out to a group that was around that individual?
- What would cause us to have to cancel services?
 - Does a certain amount of people have to get sick in your congregation?
 - Does the local health office recommendations have an impact on our decision making?
- Where are we posting our closures? (Signage, phone messages, email, social media, website, etc.).

—Tactical Communications—

Your leadership's approach and answers to tactical questions should help inform your church's communications. Do not get not caught unprepared—determine ahead of time what communication channels you will use (website, social media, email, text, worship service announcement from the platform, etc.).

1. **If the coronavirus is discovered in your area**, let your congregation know you are aware of it and are keeping an eye on it. You want them to feel safe and that there is thought behind it. Here is an example:



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Dear church family,

At YOUR CHURCH, we want to care for our congregation in all respects, including the physical well-being of our community. To that end, we are asking you, our congregants, to take precautions to keep yourself and others safe, especially in light of recent developments with the coronavirus (COVID-19).

Please be mindful of the guidance from the Washington State Department of Health and the CDC (where the first reported cases in the U.S. occurred), including:

- *Stay home when you are sick.*
- *Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after going to the bathroom; before eating; and after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.*
- *While asymptomatic travelers from China are not mandated to observe a 14-day quarantine, we urge you to consider refraining from attending church events, classes, and services until the 14-day timeframe has been observed. We also ask that anyone returning from a high-alert area (currently South Korea, Iran, Italy, and Japan) consider doing the same.*

The uncertainty of this outbreak is creating anxiety in our workplaces, schools, and day-to-day activities. Yet we remain certain of God's steadfast presence and careful attention to all that is happening. Please join us in praying for those who are affected by this illness, as well as their caregivers and those who are working around the clock to minimize the impact of this virus.

In Psalm 46, we are reminded that it is God who is our refuge and strength, and our ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, let us not fear, but with confidence use this opportunity to be the hands and feet of Jesus through our prayers and our care for others.

In Christ,

Pastor's Name



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2. **If the coronavirus is spreading in your area**, we recommend letting your congregation know your action plan and your expectations of them. It's also important that you give them an opportunity to feel heard. Here's an example from a large church in the Seattle area:

Dear church family,

I want to update you on what's happening at church in light of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak in our area. Like you, I've been following this evolving story with great concern. I've also reached out to local city officials and spoken with a number of other pastors in the area to gain perspective on how to best move forward. Please read through this entire email as it contains detailed plans for keeping our campus safe, and how you can help.

At this time, officials are not recommending the cancelation of public events or Sunday church gatherings. We will remain open and we will continue to have services on Sundays and midweek programming. In the event that local and state health officials do recommend closure or we determine it is in the best interest of our church family to close, we will inform everyone to the best of our abilities through our website, emails, and social media.

During this time, here's how we are committed to keeping our campus clean:

- a. We will sanitize highly touched surfaces before and after every service, such as doors, handles, tables, water fountains, check-in stations, and sinks.*
- b. Our staff and volunteer teams will wash their hands frequently and stay home if they are sick. In addition, our volunteers will wear gloves when they serve coffee.*
- c. We will provide additional hand sanitizer stations around campus for everyone to use.*
- d. Offering buckets will be relocated to the back of the sanctuary so you don't need to pass them down the row. You can also give online.*



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During this time, we are asking you to help stop the spread of the virus in the following ways:

- a. Stay at home when you or a family member are sick.*
- b. Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after going to the bathroom, before eating and after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.*
- c. Cover your sneeze or cough with a tissue or your arm.*
- d. Get in the habit of NOT touching your face often.*
- e. Forgo shaking hands at church; instead offer a wave or friendly smile.*
- f. If you or someone you know tests positive for COVID-19, please let us know so we can find a way to help, pray for everyone involved, and take any necessary precautions on our church campus.*

If you or a family member are sick or need to stay home during this time, we encourage you to watch our worship services online.

For families with children:

In addition to keeping our campus clean, we will be taking extra care of our childrens' spaces. Toys and rooms will be sanitized before and after every service.

Three ways you can help:

- 1. Pray – Pray for those impacted by the virus, as well as their families and loved ones.*
- 2. Give – In the coming weeks, we're looking to help those at the Life Care Center, where the virus first appeared in our area, as well as others in our area. If you'd like to join us, you can make a secure online donation on our website.*
- 3. Serve – We have been praying and thinking about how we can be together for our neighbors in the midst of this outbreak. We've been in touch with the leadership at the Life Care Center of Kirkland to see how we can help. As you may have heard, they are dealing with a number of potential coronavirus cases and are in quarantine. We sent an email earlier today detailing our plan to prepare and deliver care packages to their residents and staff.*



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Questions or concerns?

If you'd like to share your thoughts, concerns, questions, and ideas with us as we navigate our response to this situation, we'd love to hear from you. Your input and feedback are truly important to us.

While we cannot control the virus, the spread, or the impact it has in our church, we're doing everything we can to make our campus as safe and clean as possible. We appreciate your cooperation and commitment to help us do just that. We must also remember that God has not called us to live in fear but in faith. As the apostle, Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 1:7, "For the Spirit of God does not make us timid, but gives us power, love, and self-discipline." My prayer is that God will fill all of us with these three gifts, no matter what comes our way.

Warmly,

Your Pastor and Staff

—Spiritual Questions—

Before you begin any form of spiritual communication, we recommend you ask your leaders the following questions:

- What are we doing to encourage our congregation to not live in fear?
- What opportunities do we have to help our local communities?
- What are we doing to encourage our volunteers to show up and serve?
- What are we doing to help people who are staying home to stay engaged with our church (live stream, digital content, phone calls, etc.).

—Spiritual Communications—

Your leadership's approach and answers to spiritual questions should help inform your communications. People will remember more about how you've impacted their hearts than the list of procedures, so think about communicating twice as much spiritual truth as you do tactical steps. However, every church's approach to this will be different. It is important to know the best approach for your congregation (know your audience). If the virus is discovered in your area, consider the following steps:



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1. Have your pastor(s) or hosts acknowledge the crisis from the platform.
2. Have the leaders of your volunteers send a video, text message, or phone call to your volunteers letting them know how their service is making a difference. People often attend church in times of crisis—this time they might simply reach out from afar. Don't guilt them into this, let them know how they are valued and how they personally make an impact. Volunteers may be tempted to stay home, which is why this is important to do this.
3. Look for ways to make an impact in your community. The previously mentioned church in the Seattle area wanted to help the staff and patients of the Life Care Center in Kirkland—the epicenter of the coronavirus where unfortunately many residents passed away. They provided the staff with Chick-Fil-A lunches one day, and the next day delivered care packages to the residents. They posted their efforts on social media, and it gained significant traction in their community (especially in community Facebook groups). Much fear and negativity exists on social media feeds, so these posts were a stark and welcomed difference.

Here is the email they sent asking for the congregation's help:

Dear church family,

We continue to pray for wisdom on how best to prepare and respond to the recent coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak in our area. We'll be sending an email later today with a more detailed approach on how we are responding and doing our part to keep our campus safe and clean. In the meantime, we've been praying and thinking about ways we can be together for our neighbors. We've been in touch with the leadership at the Life Care Center of Kirkland. As you may have heard, they are dealing with a number of potential coronavirus cases and are in quarantine.

They were excited and encouraged by our offer to bring care packages for their residents and staff with treats, activities to do in their rooms, and other items to help brighten their days through this difficult time. They have 104 residents and around 150 staff members. If you'd like to help, here's what you can do:



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1. *Please bring items to fill the care packages to church this evening and tomorrow morning. The main lobby will be open until 9:00 p.m. tonight, and our office opens at 9:00 a.m. tomorrow. Here's a list of suggested items:*
 - a. *Playing cards, jigsaw puzzles, puzzle books (word searches, crosswords, sudoku, etc.).*
 - b. *Individually packaged, non-perishable snacks (granola bars, fruit snacks, crackers, canned drinks, etc.).*
 - c. *Hand lotion*
 - d. *Fuzzy socks*
 - e. *Magazines*
 - f. *DVDs*
 - g. *Premium facial tissues (the kind with lotion to soothe irritated noses)*
 - h. *Please DO NOT bring any homemade food, items with nuts, or used items that could carry germs or allergens.*
2. *If you feel healthy, please join us at the church at 10:00 a.m. on Tuesday to assemble the care packages to be delivered later on Tuesday. Childcare will not be provided, but older children are welcome to help assemble the packages.*
3. *If you're unable to drop off donations or help us assemble care packages, you are encouraged to donate to our efforts if you can.*

It's part of our DNA as a church to be together for our neighbors, the next generation, and those in need so that the Puget Sound and beyond can flourish. We believe God calls us to be agents of love and care for those who are hurting—especially in times like this. This is our chance! Thanks for being part of helping those at risk, however you can.

—Other Communications—

Some additional information your leaders should consider:

1. **Staff communication.** Always let the staff know your plans *before* anyone else. Always. They are your team members and can help answer many questions on your behalf.
 - a. What policies and /or closures does the staff and/or volunteers need to be updated on?
 - b. What does it look like for staff to work remotely?



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- c. What does PTO/Sick Time look like?
 - d. Who is the point person for communication?
 - i. This person should set the standard for all forms of communication.
 - ii. Your staff and volunteers should reiterate what has already been communicated. Be consistent and clear!
 - e. Are there staff/volunteer social media policies in place?
 - i. You don't want staff or volunteers mentioning they think they know someone who attends your church and has the virus.
- 2. Dealing with the press.** Be prepared for the press to contact you. This can be a great opportunity for exposure in your community if you're ready and have a plan!
- a. Who is the point person to talk to the press?
 - i. That person should have knowledge of the entire approach and policies.
 - ii. Everyone involved should be consistent with what is posted and said. The media picks up on inconsistencies.
 - iii. Try to control some of the narratives by staying positive, encouraging, and calm.
 - iv. Avoid letting the media approach people in your congregation who you don't know. It could be someone's first day there and you don't want them feeling out of place and uncomfortable.
 - b. Try reaching out or tagging the press if you are making an impact in the community.
 - c. Here is a good example of a how a church in the Seattle area was featured in a positive light in a Washington Post article about the virus:
www.washingtonpost.com/national/coronavirus-spread-kirkland-washington/2020/03/01/5e112fb8-5c10-11ea-9055-5fa12981bbbf_story.html

These guidelines were developed by Northshore Church in Kirkland, Washington, and made available for all free and fair use.