



MID COUNCIL RELATIONS

Being church when you can't be together in person, and more ...

March 13, 2020

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Maintaining Community When You Can't Gather—And Preparing to Regroup Later

If you're like me, the avalanche of news/information/advice about COVID-19 is becoming overwhelming and wearying (though certainly not as much as getting sick!)—but I'm going to add to it anyway.

Kentucky is one of the states whose governor has announced precautions, including a request that congregations cancel worship services. Stated Clerk J. Herbert Nelson, II, has issued this statement:

In this time of crisis, we are presented with a challenge that calls us to engage in deep prayer and commonsense protection against a virus that we are not able to contain at this time. Our understanding is that church attendance is an individual choice. It is also a representation of the grace given to us by the Almighty God.

The decision on whether church services should be cancelled is between each congregation and their presbytery leaders. They need to determine what is best for their community and the individuals who gather for worship.

Constitutional interpretation has issued an [advisory opinion about congregations and councils continuing to function](#) under the current circumstances. There is further information about electronic meetings under "Presbytery Meetings" in the Resource Archives section of the "Welcome to Mid Council Ministry" Equip course.

[Here's the latest on plans for the General Assembly and how GA staff are proceeding during the pandemic](#)—including the news that registration for GA will be delayed further, until no later than April 20. Like you at the local level, decision-makers here are seeking to do our part as citizens and neighbors, concerned for the whole world community as well as protecting our own communities in a time of great uncertainty. We pray that these precautions will help to stem the spread of COVID-19.

Note that *all deadlines for the submission of business are still in effect.*

OGA is communicating directly with commissioners and advisory delegates about the registration delays. Please encourage your commissioners and YAAD to check for emails from the GA Meeting Service (which sometimes go to clutter or spam folders).

Thanks to Andy James from the Presbytery of New Hope for these tips for congregations and councils who are considering cutting down on in-person meetings in response to the coronavirus alarm:

- **Check your contact list and communications.** Verify that you have current contact information for all members and regular attendees at your church. Go over the protocol for communicating the cancellation of worship or other events to these persons and the broader public. Even smaller congregations that depend on family networks may want to make sure that everyone has a “buddy” who is not part of their own family.
- **Make sure you have remote and shared access to key information.** Put critical electronic files in cloud-based storage so key leaders can access information from home. Know how to access the church’s voicemail system or answering machine remotely in case important messages are left there or you need to update the recording to reflect a cancellation or closure. Set up an electronic distribution list through a database or distribution service (i.e. Constant Contact or Mailchimp) so that access is not limited to a single person.
- **Consider electronic conferencing options to keep people connected.** The church’s ministry does not have to stop if in-person gatherings have to be canceled for health and safety reasons. Explore ways of gathering for worship, prayer, and/or Bible study via conferencing technology like Zoom (videoconferences) or FreeConferenceCall. These have the added benefit of providing options for bringing people together in our increasingly complex lifestyles.
- **Set up giving online.** Contributions to the church can continue even when worship is canceled or attendance diminished through any of several online giving options. Look for a service that integrates with your church’s database software or consider the [Presbyterian Foundation’s Online Giving Program](#), which offers low transaction fees, then encourage members to establish automatic recurring gifts.
- **Adopt rules for electronic meetings.** Sessions and other church committees can meet electronically via videoconference or teleconference if the church has adopted appropriate procedures for such in advance. Make sure your session’s manual of operations includes these provisions *before* you need to use them, even if you don’t have the technology yet!

Thanks as well to Sue Krummel from the Presbytery of Chicago, who also offers thoughts about “the things you will want to talk about with your session and other leaders in your congregation.”

- How will you continue to include those who are ill or afraid or following the recommendations or requirements of governmental officials in worship and other spiritual practices of your congregation? Do you have a way to produce a video of worship? Are you on Facebook live? Do you post your worship services to

YouTube? Does your pastor post the sermon or prayers? This is a good time to increase your online presence so that all of your members and friends can stay connected to your group spiritual practices over the next weeks and months.

- Have you considered holding smaller events as Zoom meetings or by Skype or Facetime? For instance, do you have a Bible study that meets regularly? If it becomes important for people not to meet in person, have you helped them find a way to continue that practice electronically?
- What about pastoral care? This is the time to remind your deacons, elders, Stephen's Ministers, and staff that they should not make pastoral visits if they are themselves feeling unwell. This is also a time to think about how to help people feel the care offered by your congregation without physical contact; do you have a robust ministry of sending written notes, making phone calls, and contacting your shut-in or ill members or those experiencing loss by electronic means?
- Do you have a way for members to make contributions electronically? The best way to do that is to have people set up electronic funds transfer so that their contributions are made on a regular basis. (Your bank or the Presbyterian Foundation can help you with this.) Is there a place on your website where people can make an online contribution? Can people contribute by text? This is the time to improve all of these systems for your congregation.
- But perhaps the most important thing your leaders can be doing now is planning about how you will get people back. For the next few weeks or even months, it is likely that there will either be smaller congregations present in sanctuaries; or we will make the decision or be ordered to cancel worship altogether. People will find out that there are other things to do on Sunday morning; they will find other ways to meet their spiritual needs. The trend in this country is already away from worship attendance. What kind of event will you sponsor, what kind of special worship will you have, what kind of celebration will you have to welcome people back to church when this is over? And that is what we need to remember—it will be over.

Jim Kirk from Presbyterian Disaster Assistance passes on a ministry opportunity that probably wouldn't occur to many of us:

Today I received a copy of [the attached post that was written by a college student to the disaster response community](#). He articulates the impact of the coronavirus on college students. It did get me thinking. Prompted by the post, I have reached out to Ukirk and APCU to discuss possible ways of supporting impacted college students.

The post also got me thinking of the many mid councils and congregations that have a meaningful campus ministry. Perhaps many of you have already done so, but I'm wondering if there are opportunities for ministry with college students whose lives are being significantly impacted.

I am open to conversations about how the church can step into this space to be the hands and feet of Christ.

And here are some other ideas gleaned from mid council newsletters and other sources:

- [Shared examples of care from New Brunswick](#)
- [Resource compilation from the Synod of the Trinity](#)
- [Safety resources from the Insurance Board](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
- [Ideas and resources from the Presbytery of the Northwest Coast](#)
- [Collection of PC\(USA\) resources](#)