

Dear Members and Friends of St. Matthew's Church:

A book we use as a foundation for leadership formation is called *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*—a title that seems especially appropriate to the challenge of the current season. The purpose of this email is to express my thoughts on how we are called to respond to the Coronavirus pandemic and the anxiety surrounding it.

A Call to Prayer

First of all, this season of time calls us to fervent prayer. When we encounter tragedy, disease, or other challenges, we are reminded of our vulnerability and mortality, and of the fleeting and transitory nature of this life. We are reminded of the limits of science, medicine, and technology. We are reminded to put our faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, who has redeemed the world by the Cross and through whom we have eternal life and the hope of Resurrection and life in the world to come. It is appropriate that this challenge is occurring during Lent, a season when we follow Jesus into the wilderness to fast and pray and test our faith (Matthew 4:1-11). This is a time to be all the more constant in your prayers so that you can stay connected to Christ and not get caught up in the anxiety of the world. As Jesus said,

Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid (John 14:27).

Remember that Christ is with us always—especially in our struggles, pain, and anxiety (Hebrews. 13:5). This does not mean nothing bad will ever happen to us. It means that no matter what happens, Christ will be with us in it. He will do his will in our lives through this challenge as we trust him (Romans 8:28).

We should pray each day that God will protect and deliver us, those around us, and the world from this disease, and that God will be at work in the midst of people's anxiety to reveal himself to them and draw many people to faith. I especially commend the Litany (BCP p 54-59) as a means of intercession at this time. This has been used by the church through the centuries for intercession in time of plague and famine.

Reasonable Precautions

As we pray, we should take reasonable precautions to avoid danger and harm to ourselves and others. In the light of current risk factors, the advice of our medical experts, and the size of our community, we have decided not to cancel our public gatherings on Sunday for prayer. We will continue to celebrate the Eucharist, intercede for the needs of the world, and receive the Bread of Life and the Medicine of Immortality. In the face of the current threat, we will begin to offer the Litany at each Sunday celebration of the Eucharist in the place of the Prayer for the Church. We will offer the Litany with specific intention that God will deliver us, our families, our communities, our nation, and the world from this current threat, and that many hearts will be turned back to God.

However, we also think it is reasonable and respectful of the uniqueness of each person and his or her unique circumstances not to ask anyone to do anything that produces unnecessary discomfort or anxiety. Therefore, I offer these points of advice and counsel.

1. While we do not plan to remove the administration of the Chalice from Holy Communion, you may feel free to receive only the Body of Christ if you have any uneasiness about receiving the Sacred Blood from the Common Cup. The theology of the church teaches that one receives all of Christ in either kind.

2. If you are uneasy about coming to church at all, especially if you are older or are suffering from some form of disease that makes you vulnerable, please feel free to stay at home during this season of time. You can pray with us from home. You can join in our service via our live-stream feed and pray with us online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dUCjDK1-dQM&feature=youtu.be>

3. It should also be noted that we have weekday Masses attended by smaller groups. You might consider coming to one of these services instead if you feel more comfortable about that.

4. If you or any member of your family is sick, stay home. Symptoms of this virus include: Mild to severe respiratory illness, fever, persistent cough, and difficulty breathing. If you or a member of your family is experiencing any of these symptoms, stay home until all of the symptoms resolve.

5. Since there is a general uneasiness about how to greet each other—handshakes are out, fist bumps are in—we will be eliminating the receiving line after church for the foreseeable future. After church, people can feel free to go directly to the St. Barnabas Pavilion for coffee or feel free to go directly to their car and go home, without any need to greet anyone in any way they are not comfortable with.

6. While we will continue to have coffee, we will eliminate our bagels and other food for the current season of time. This will reduce the number of things that are touched and passed.

A Call to Love and Ministry

Let us also remember in this time of anxiety that we are called to love our neighbors. The earliest Christians had the biggest impact on their cities in times of crisis. When plagues struck the densely crowded cities of the ancient world and people began to flee, the Christians stayed and ministered to those in need. This profound witness contributed to the explosive growth of the church. The current crisis can tempt us to be so concerned about our own health and survival that we forget that we are called to love each other (John 13:25) and our neighbors (Luke 10:25-37). As we take reasonable precautions for our families, let us treat others as though they were our family also, remembering the words of Jesus, "Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me" (Matthew. 25:40). Pray for those affected around you and offer help and support as your ability and circumstances allow. Remember that this is time for ministry—for love rather than fear.

In summary, let us commit all things to God in prayer and put our trust in him. Let us take the reasonable precautions we can take given our circumstances. Let us love and minister to each other and our neighbors. Above all, remember, "Do not be afraid" (John 6:20); Jesus is Lord and God is faithful.

In Christ,

+Stephen