

Pastoral Letter on COVID-19

3/12/20

Background

I am sure that all of our members are well aware of the concerns generated by what is commonly called the Coronavirus. It is officially named "COVID-19" and on Wednesday it was designated as a pandemic by the World Health Organization. Concerns dominate our news media and our situation is rapidly changing. In fact, I have written several versions of this letter, but it keeps getting outdated as new information emerges. I wanted to send a letter to update the congregation on what we know right now and what steps we are planning to take. At the close of this letter, there is an explanation of why we think COVID-19 is a concern to take seriously. Pressing information has been frontloaded. I am sure that more updates will emerge.

Immediate Plan

Cancellations

City Reformed has made a decision to cancel everything BUT the 10:15AM worship service for Sunday morning. We will continue to monitor this situation and make a final decision regarding the worship service by Saturday afternoon.

- Sunday School has been canceled.
- Children's Church and nursery have been canceled.
- Fellowship hour has been canceled.
- The women's retreat has been canceled.
- The Evening Service has been canceled.

Video Streaming

City Reformed is preparing to offer a live video stream of our church service beginning Sunday, March 15. More information on this will follow. Our worship service will stream through Facebook, or through our church website, or both. We recognize that something significant is lost when God's people are not physically present with each other. However, we recognize the seriousness of this situation and that such measures are sometimes necessary.

Reducing Risk

1. Please consider the CDC guidelines for all of your personal conduct. (See Appendix B)
2. Please self-quarantine if you are sick.
3. If a member of your family is sick, do not attend any church event.
4. When members of our church meet together, we will take steps to reduce all unnecessary contact.
5. Let's try to keep personal contact to a minimum in our personal greetings.

Special Concern

Evidence shows that people who are 70 years of age or older or those with chronic health conditions are most at risk. We strongly urge people in those conditions to be cautious in general and avoid any large group activities including church worship services.

Ministry Going Forward

We have not canceled community groups. Because those groups meet in a smaller setting, they pose a lesser risk. We will continue to monitor this. We do ask that any church groups that meet would use caution and seek to minimize unnecessary contact. Currently our elders, deacons, staff, and women's ministry council are actively discussing how we can maintain healthy ministry during a time of uncertainty.

When Assistance is Needed

Our deacons have also met and discussed the potential need that some members may have for financial assistance or other types of assistance during this time. Please contact our deacons if you have needs that arise due to the impact of this concern on our region. They are ready and willing to help.

Prayer and Spiritual Concerns

When it comes to any disease, there is a lot that we don't know. But there are still many things that are certain. I want to remind you that what we are experiencing is new in modern, western countries – at least for our younger generations. But it is not new for God's people through history. The Christian faith is a faith that was "once for all delivered to the saints." It has sustained God's people through enormous trials, including far more frightening epidemics.

We should take this disease seriously and strive to reduce the unnecessary risks for ourselves and for our neighbors. At the same time, we must continue to take our faith seriously. God always works to build his church through the shaking of our earthly kingdoms. We simply don't know what will happen with the COVID-19 pandemic. It seems likely that the disruption will be significant, but we pray that the impact on human life will be less so. In the meantime, our friends and neighbors are going to be looking for answers to this basic human problem. There are many things that we can know confidently in this uncertain time. The Bible does not tell us all that we want to know about medicine or epidemiology. But it does tell us that God is powerful enough to work for our good in all circumstances. It tells us how a person can be reconciled to their creator through the death and resurrection of Jesus. It tells us that disease and even death do not have the final word. It reminds us that care for our neighbor is always costly and that times of struggle and difficulty are opportunities for God's light to shine. Please join me in consistent and regular prayer.

Please Pray:

- That God will guide our church leaders as we navigate the unfolding challenges.
- That our health care providers would have energy and would be protected.
- That our government officials would make wise decisions.
- That the weak and vulnerable among us would be shielded.
- That the sick would recover.
- That the spread of the disease would be limited.
- That the glory of Jesus Christ would be made known even in the midst of this uncertainty.
- That we would have opportunities to share the hope of Jesus with our neighbors around us.

In Christ,



Pastor Matt

Appendix A: Evaluating the Concern and Slowing the Spread

There is a lot that we don't know about COVID-19, and fear grows in the dark. Estimates from countries that are already affected show that it has a higher mortality rate than more common strains of the flu. This seems to affect older people and medically compromised people more. It seems that most of the people in our congregation – who are younger and not medically compromised – are not in grave danger. That is good to know because it helps to put some of our fears in perspective. On the other hand, it is important to see the bigger picture. The issue that drives our policy is not simply the calculations about our own health. Instead, we are properly concerned about how our actions are impacting other people.

One thing that makes COVID-19 dangerous is that it appears to be fairly contagious, and people can be carriers with minimal symptoms or before they develop symptoms. What that means, practically, is that for a lot of people COVID-19 does not pose a threat to their own personal health. But if the disease were to spread quickly in our region, the numerical consequence of large scale infections could prove to be very troubling. First, it would mean that larger numbers of medically vulnerable people would contract the disease. Second, it would mean that our health care systems would be swamped by a large influx of patients, possibly exceeding their ability to offer personal care. In summary, I urge you to think about this problem from a larger frame of reference. That is, how does my behavior impact the health of my neighbors.

Toward that end, the reasonable and realistic goal for public health across our region is to slow the spread of infections. The primary goal of school closures (as I understand this) is to slow the spread of this disease. This is not only to protect the children, but also the most vulnerable members of our society who could be infected through the children. As the concerning time for infection may last several weeks and perhaps a couple of months, it is not easy to know what steps we can take that are realistic and helpful. Below is a list of actions that we believe are wise and reasonable. We recognize that we will continue to need to update these as the situation unfolds.

Appendix B: CDC Guidelines for Healthy Personal Conduct

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) has published these guidelines for how we can reduce the spread of infections from person to person in all of our life circumstances:

1. Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
2. Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
3. Stay home when you are sick, except to get medical care.
4. Cover your nose or cough with a tissue and then throw the tissue in the trash.
5. Clean and disinfect frequently touches objects or surfaces.
6. Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds