

Practical Steps and Christian Presence: Coronavirus Update 13 March 2020

As the Coronavirus continues to spread there are two key areas of concern for churches: taking practical steps to minimise the spread of infection and being a Christ-like presence in a time of fear.

Part 1 – Practical Steps

It is important that churches play a diligent and responsible part in minimising the spread of Coronavirus.

a. Advice for Individuals

Follow NHS advice to carry tissues and use them to catch coughs and sneezes, then bin the tissue. Wash hands regularly with soap and water (for 20 seconds). Anyone experiencing the recent onset of continuous cough and/or high temperature should self-isolate for 7 days.

b. Church Gatherings

At present there is no advice for meetings to be cancelled, unless they involve more than 500 people. However, in any gathering space it is important that frequently touched surfaces are cleaned and disinfected and it is advisable to have hand sanitisers available for all.

c. Hand-shaking and other physical contact

There is no current government or NHS advice to avoid hand-shaking but churches may decide it is wise to refrain from this, especially as many of our churches include a high number of people who are in groups for whom Coronavirus poses a greater risk. It would then be important to communicate this to the whole church through announcements verbally and in your other communications.

d. Communion

There are significant infection risks in sharing communion. Best practice at this time includes: pre-cutting bread into pieces rather than everyone handling the loaf; avoiding passing a tray from hand to hand across the whole church (for example by inviting people to come to a table where cut bread and glasses of wine are set out); avoiding the use of a common cup.

e. Planning Ahead

It may well be that in the near future churches are advised to cease meeting together. It would be wise to plan now for how you will respond to this. For many churches there will be the possibility of live-streaming services or uploading videos of worship. Some may choose to meet in small groups in homes where the potential for transmission will be much smaller. Many people will lose vital spiritual support and social contact, so plans for ensuring everyone remains connected should be made.

Part 2 – Christian Presence

The current disruption and uncertainty is understandably causing a high level of fear in many people and a number of practical needs will be experienced due to self-isolation, illness, financial need and potentially bereavement. The church of Jesus, commanded to love others as Jesus loves us, has a vital part to play in our communities at this time. As in past times of crisis, this is a moment when the

church can play a significant part in serving our communities, caring for people in need and bringing the peace of Christ. Here are some particular areas to consider:

a. Trusting God and being agents of peace

Jesus has made his peace a gift to us (John 14.27) and this is a gift to share. In his strength, we can be a non-anxious presence in the midst of this crisis, listening to people's fears, offering gentle reassurance, re-affirming wise advice, and bringing the hope of the good news of Jesus.

b. Finding people who are affected and offering practical support

Many people will need to self-isolate and it is important they are not forgotten. We can intentionally watch out for them, keep in touch by phone or social media, offer to do shopping or provide other practical help. Some will get seriously ill and we can demonstrate to them that they are surrounded by a loving community who are walking alongside them.

c. Giving special attention to health care workers of whom much is demanded

The weeks ahead will be increasingly challenging for everyone working in the health care. We can find many ways to reach out to them with acts of kindness and expressions of appreciation.

d. Prayer

Praying for God's world is an important aspect of being the church. Let's keep thoughtful and faithful prayer in our hearts and our in our worship as we go through the challenging days ahead. Here is a prayer from the Baptist Union of Scotland you may wish to use in worship or share through your church's social media.

Lord, Jesus Christ, we come to you carrying the fears and uncertainties of this current crisis, hearing your invitation to cast all our cares on you.

*Jesus, the Great Healer,
for those suffering the symptoms of coronavirus, bring recovery, immunity and new strength.*

*Jesus, the Prince of Peace
for those full of fear at what might come to pass, let the knowledge of your presence calm their troubled hearts.*

*Jesus, the Servant of All,
for those providing health care in these demanding times, give strength, skill and support.*

*Jesus, Lord of the Church,
For the sake of your world and the glory of your name, raise us up for deeds of compassion and mercy in these days.*

*Jesus, Crucified and Risen Saviour,
may your power be made known, for the blessing of your world and the glory of your name.*

Amen