

A Statement from the Bishops of The Episcopal Church in Tennessee

Dear Clergy and People of the Dioceses of East Tennessee, West Tennessee, and Tennessee,

We understand the news of the spread of the COVID19 virus (Coronavirus), on top of an already difficult flu season, raises concerns and anxieties. Our respective Dioceses are working together to stay informed and supportive of our faith communities across the state. As new information which may be helpful arises, we will post it on our websites and share it with our congregations. We are regularly reviewing guidelines and recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as well as consulting local medical professionals. When you receive information about Coronavirus and other infectious diseases from the media and other sources please consider carefully whether the source of the information is trustworthy.

In the meantime, we commend these effective practices to you, especially to clergy in charge of congregations and those who may lead congregations in worship:

- **The most important way to minimize the spread of infectious diseases is for people who have symptoms such as fever, upset stomach, or frequent coughing or sneezing, to stay home and to seek medical attention as symptoms warrant. This includes clergy.** Please notify the appropriate person at your congregation if you will miss a worship service or event so substitutes can be found. The clergy or lay ministers can bring the sacraments to those who cannot attend a service and/or provide pastoral care by phone as appropriate.
- **Frequent handwashing is another important way to minimize spread.** Hands should be washed often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds (about as long as it takes to sing the Doxology). Handwashing is especially critical after going to the bathroom; before eating; after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing; or if hands are visibly dirty. Plenty of soap and paper towels should be provided in restrooms and kitchens. If soap and water are not readily available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol. Place containers of hand sanitizer in the pews, near doors, and beside tissue boxes to be used when handwashing is not readily available.

If an infectious disease, such as the flu or Coronavirus is spreading in your community, your congregational leadership may consider whether some or all of the following would be appropriate:

- **The Peace:** You may want to invite worshipers to remain in their pews/seats and greet one another with a bow at the Peace, acknowledging each other while avoiding physical contact.
- **The Holy Eucharist:** Receiving the sacrament in one kind has ancient precedent in our spiritual life. We believe that those who receive only the bread (or wine) have fully received.

The bread may be distributed by Eucharistic ministers who have cleansed their hands. Ask the altar guild to clean handrails and the altar rail before and after each service.

- **Avoid Intinction:** Because hands are a common source of infection, **Intinction by the communicant is not a sanitary substitute for drinking from the chalice.**
- **The Receiving Line:** Following the service, the receiving line should include conversation but omit physical contact.
- **Coffee Hour:** Food may be served by individuals who have washed their hands, put on serving gloves, and are using tongs to minimize the touching of food. Either paper plates and napkins or a dishwasher with a water temperature setting hot enough to kill germs should be used for cleanup. Similarly, beverages should be served by individuals who have washed their hands and are wearing gloves to minimize the number of people handling beverage containers.
- **Large gatherings or events:** Consider rescheduling if possible or canceling if necessary.

Whatever steps are appropriate in your context, it is essential that you communicate your decisions to the congregation. Explain the steps you are taking and why. Clear and open communication can be both informative and calming.

Episcopal Relief and Development has provided more resources on the ways your community of faith can respond to epidemics. Please visit http://bit.ly/erd_response for more information.

Please keep those who are ill with infectious diseases, their families and caregivers, and our medical care providers, in your prayers. The Episcopal Church in Tennessee has a strong history of caring for one another and for our communities in times of illness and health. With God's help, we will continue that tradition together.

The Rt. Rev'd John C. Bauerschmidt,
Bishop of Tennessee

The Rt. Rev'd Brian L. Cole,
Bishop of East Tennessee

The Rt. Rev'd Phoebe A. Roaf
Bishop of West Tennessee