

Dear Church,

We write this at a moment when in Massachusetts our Governor has declared a [state of emergency](#) because of the Corona Virus. Pastors and Church Leaders are making hard decisions about what to keep and what to cancel or modify. As a statewide network of Christians from many different traditions, the Massachusetts Council of Churches can see multiple strategies for the living of these days. As Greek Orthodox Archbishop Elpidophoros said, “Science and our God-given reason demand that we employ every means available to protect ourselves and our families against the spread of Covid-19 and any other disease. In a crisis such as this, we need to exercise vigilance as a community, lest our churches become points of transmission of the disease.”

We’ve gathered some of the best of what we’re seeing, encouraging you to make the best judgment for your community. We also know that within this network, there are some churches without financial margins to offset things like lost collection or rental income and others with financial reserves. We hope that those to whom much has been given will be generous in this time.

Mass Council has made the decision to work remotely until March 30 at a minimum and will be holding no in-person meetings. We will be communicating primarily through email, posting updates on [facebook](#) and our [website](#), and will be checking phone messages on the office phone regularly. We know you all are making these hard decisions too.

We’ve written this for Massachusetts churches, but hope many of the principles may apply beyond the Commonwealth.

- 1. Hold fast to what is good:** We are connected even when we cannot gather in body. In this moment of uncertainty and high anxiety, we can all hold fast to our God who again and again throughout Scripture proclaims, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” We can take precautions while not stoking fear. We can follow wise counsel and rely on God to be our foundation. Church leadership is enormously hard and taxing at this moment, and yet, we can find ways to love one another and show the healing love of Jesus Christ, even and especially now.
- 2. Follow directives from Public Health authorities and your Church leaders:** Please read and keep updated on the resources from your [Department of Health](#). Use the [1 page printable fact sheets](#). Use the [Centers for Disease Control’s Guides and Checklists for Faith-Based Leaders](#). Listen to the guidance of local public health officials and school Superintendents. For Church specific directives, you can read the resource guides from the [Episcopal Diocese of Western MA](#) and [Episcopal Diocese of Mass.](#) (especially around Eucharistic

protocols and a [message from Bishop Curry](#) regarding canceling in-person worship); [Southern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ \(including Pandemic Preparation Check list\)](#); [the American Baptist Churches](#); [Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America](#); [New England Synod of the ELCA](#), [New England Yearly Meeting of Quakers](#); [New England United Methodist Church](#); [Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Orthodox Church](#); [Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston](#); [African Methodist Episcopal Church](#); and [Presbytery of Boston](#).

3. **Care for the most vulnerable:** The precautions we put in place are not just about our own well-being, but about the whole of the body, including the most vulnerable among us. Don't presume you know everyone's health conditions. Many conditions that make people vulnerable to this illness are not visible to the eye, like compromised immune systems. Be mindful of people in your congregation who may have depression and anxiety disorders for whom this time is especially troubling. Consider your hourly wage employees when you cancel an event, and if possible, pay them anyway. Be mindful of artists, musicians, caregivers, pastors, and folks who work contract to contract and paycheck to paycheck. Don't forget small business owners, and find ways to patronize them, as you feel comfortable.
4. **As "social isolation" sets in, find new ways to be networked across the Body of Christ:** We are seeing churches get creative with ways to stay connected, especially if gathering in person is temporarily impossible. Divide up the congregational directory with each deacon receiving an equal number under their care. Assign congregants to clusters of 3, with generational diversity. Call, text, Skype, Facetime, write letters, especially to elders. Put notes in the mail to the workers at local nursing homes- especially as family member visitations are curtailed, chaplains and nursing home staff will have an increased emotional burden in their care for patients. ([Chaplains, special webinar on 3/17 at noon](#) for you all) Send notes of affirmation to "essential employees."
5. **Notice and Resist Scapegoating:** There is a long and painful history during disease outbreaks of finding and blaming different racial, ethnic and minoritized communities. Keep eyes open for the folks who usually get "scapegoated" during an outbreak and actively resist these stereotypes: we've already seen it happen. Jews, LGBTQ folks, Asian Americans, Coptic Christians, African Americans, Africans, Mexicans, new immigrants, and women have all been wrongly scapegoated for other diseases before. The erroneous scapegoating of Jews was so deadly during the Black Plague in the 1300's that more than 200 Jewish communities across Europe were massacred. You can read the full book "[Scapegoat: A History of Blaming Other People](#)," by Charlie Campbell or the short essay "[Finding a Scapegoat When Epidemics Strike](#)," by Donald G. McNeil Jr.
6. **Experiment with ways to learn, deepen our faith, and connect:** If you decide to live stream portions of worship, here's a [live-stream worship guide](#) for making this transition in a hurry. If this is outside your capacity, consider directing your people to another church streaming worship. Experiment with other ways to connect, like listening to a

podcast episode and then starting an email discussion. Invite everyone to watch a lecture online (like this one from our 2019 [Preaching Black Resiliency speaker Rev. Dr. Leslie Callahan](#)) and then gather for a call. Hold Bible study as a Zoom meeting. The United Methodist Church has some tips for online Bible Study [here](#). One Quaker colleague has shared a good round up of resources [here](#). Use a free conference call number to have folks opt-in for a prayer call or try holding a prayer meeting with Facebook live. Perhaps this is the opportunity to try and do something you've long considered but haven't done.

7. **Experiment Online, but Check Presumptions:** Don't make presumptions about technological fluency or online connectivity. We've heard of some religious communities having "Zoom trainings" in person, or offering online instructions or printed handouts. Not everyone has wifi or computers at home, so consider what can be done with a just mobile phone. Phone calls may be the most inclusive baseline in your community. Try a text chain for prayer requests. Know what your community uses to communicate (What'sApp? Facebook Messenger? Skype?) and use those media folks already have facility with.
8. **Pray:** The Church has been here before. Invoke the names of the saints, ancestors and forerunners who have guided the church in times of plagues and illness before. Remember especially [Rev. Absalom Jones and Bishop Richard Allen and the Black Philadelphians who cared for white residents during the yellow fever of 1793.](#) Remember [Florence Nightingale](#) who founded modern nursing and declared "God has spoke to me and called me to His service" of caring for the sick. Remember [St. Rocco](#), who himself contracted the plague. Remember [Keith Haring](#) and give thanks for [Archbishop Tutu](#) and all who bear witness that the body of Christ has AIDS.
9. **Give, financially:** *Please* keep your financial commitments to you congregation and institutions like [Massachusetts Council of Churches](#), even if you are not able to gather in person. We observe churches using a wide range of platforms and options for online and automated: [Givelify](#), [GivePlus](#) (thru Vanco), [Venmo](#), [Cash.App](#), [Paypal](#), auto-withdrawals from bank accounts, and good old fashioned paper checks. Even as institutions may shut some things down, insurance and salaries and bills still need to be paid. Please keep giving.
10. **Contribute to the Needs of the Saints:** we've heard from a number of the "outdoor" churches made up of primarily unhoused members, and they are struggling, mightily. As hard as it is to keep your hands clean, think of living outdoors. One [homeless parishioner](#) said, "You want to be clean, but you can't; no one will let you use their bathrooms. There's no bathrooms, there's no sinks, there's no place to get clean." So here is what you can do. Please give the following:
 - Money to supplement the decrease in food donations
 - Cleaning Supplies: Clorox wipes, hand soap, paper towels, hand sanitizer or ingredients (rubbing alcohol at 70% or higher and aloe vera gel)
 - Personal hygiene supplies: individual packs of tissues, individual handi-wipes,

- Individual Gift cards to Dunkin Donuts, McDonald's, Burger King

As volunteers have been decreasing due to social distancing, these communities are feeling further isolated. Consider inviting your church to send cards. These are the outdoor or housing unstable/homeless churches of Massachusetts, mailing addresses at the link: Boston's [Common Cathedral](#); Boston's [MANNA community](#); Cambridge's [Outdoor Church](#); Cambridge's [Friday Café](#); Waltham's [Chaplain's on the Way](#); Worcester's [Worcester Fellowship](#); Worcester's [Walking Together](#); Springfield's [Church without Walls](#); Northampton's [Cathedral in the Night](#); Greenfield's [Cathedral in the Light](#); Pittsfield's [Cathedral of the Beloved](#).

11. Care for the Community: This is tricky, but consider those who use and share your space. Look at your weekly calendar and see who all is using the building. Be in regular communication with all who use the building about your policies during this time: church remains open but is daily cleaned; only meetings of 10 or less; no meetings at all and building closes, or that the decision is up to them. We are especially mindful of the needs of twelve-step groups, and the participants whose very lives depend on community and sobriety.

12. Presume everyone is doing the best that they can: Be gracious with yourself and others. Operate with the presumption that everyone is doing the best that they can, and so extend extra grace. This is really, really hard. Folks are taxed emotionally and financially. As best you can, let as much as you can go. This is not business as usual, and so we're all going to have to be flexible when we can't get that grant report in, or host that meeting or respond to that email. People are still applying for jobs, trying to file for disability, or make ends meet, so as best you can, extend as much grace as possible.

Let's continue to collaborate

We've begun a [google doc](#) to collect ideas, best practices, resources and questions. We will be active on [facebook](#) and have begun a [page on our website for resources](#) as well. Email council@masscouncilofchurches.org if you want to get in touch.

You are in our prayers as you do the difficult work of discerning, making tough choices, and imagining new ways to gather. Remember that none of us is in this alone. Let's stay connected in this time of uncertainty, to one another, and to the One who is our source and strength.

With hope,
Rev. Laura, Rev. Carrington, Rev. Kenneth, & Rev. Meagan

Thank you, Donors!

There really is no Massachusetts Council of Churches without the churches, church members and church leaders of Massachusetts. We need your support

in order to continue our work in areas that matter to you. Will you join us today with a financial contribution?

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