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## Faith in the Time of Coronavirus: The Power of Spacial Solidarity

*How the global pandemic is reshaping the lives of communities of faith*

By Cynthia G. Lindner | MARCH 19, 2020

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*In our times of greatest need, Americans have always turned to prayer to help guide us through trials and periods of uncertainty. As we continue to face the unique challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic, millions of Americans are unable to gather in their churches, temples, synagogues, mosques, and other houses of worship. But in this time we must not cease asking God for added wisdom, comfort, and strength, and we must especially pray for those who have suffered harm or who have lost loved ones. I ask you to join me in a day of prayer for all people who have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic and to pray for God's healing hand to be placed on the people of our Nation.*

*-Donald J. Trump, Proclamation on the National Day of Prayer for all Americans Affected by the Coronavirus Pandemic and for our National Response Efforts*

The President's proclamation for a National Day of Prayer, like much of his administration's response to the global coronavirus pandemic, seemed like an afterthought. Published on the White House's website on Saturday, March 14, the statement urged people of faith to pray for the nation in concert, the very next day.

The gesture was too little to catch the attention of all but the President's most avid watchers, and too late to be taken into account by citizens who gather for Jumma prayers on Fridays or Shabbat services on Saturdays; it likely escaped the attention of many Christian congregations as well. If the Proclamation appeared on the radar screens of those who count

themselves as among the “nones,” those who do not identify with a religious tradition or community at all, it was likely that this prescription for prayer from such an impious actor only served to bolster their lack of confidence in the efficacy of “thoughts and prayers” when what was sorely needed was sound information and readily available testing.

Fortunately, communities of faith, unlike the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, do not have to wait on instructions from the Commander in Chief in order to respond to human suffering. Countless websites, blogs, emails, and news articles posted over the last two weeks attest to the surprising capacity of ancient traditions to adapt and respond to the complex challenges of a virulent virus in our hyper-connected culture. Synagogues, masjids, sanghas, and churches across the world are mining the resources of their traditions and the practical wisdom of their local communities to offer innovative ways of being present, practicing compassion and courage, and building relationships in the face of near epidemic levels of anxiety, and the attendant threat of social isolation and tribalism.

It is impossible to appreciate the power, import, and ingenuity of these communities’ responses without reminding ourselves of the singular significance of bodies gathered in holy spaces, and of the sacrifices made by millions of the faithful, across generations, to do just that. Being present in the synagogue as a son or daughter opens the Torah for the first time, lining up with one’s Muslim brothers and sisters for prayer in the masjid, receiving the bread and cup during a Sunday celebration of the Eucharist in the sanctuary that has sheltered one’s family for generations—these are not incidental considerations, but rather an enactment of the deepest realities of one’s faith and life. The religious, political, and existential meaning of black Christians gathering with autonomy and dignity in their own houses of worship, Jewish worshippers finding solidarity and continuity at temple, and Muslim immigrants connecting with one another and with their faith in mosques and Islamic centers, cannot be overstated.

For millions of believers, it is simply impossible to separate prayer, people, and place. And yet, on the same weekend when the President was calling people of faith to prayer, hundreds of religious communities were doing just that, in unprecedented ways: calling people to prayer, into reverential relationship with God and with one another, by closing the doors of their gathering spaces and urging their worshippers to stay at home.

In an [article in the \*Forward\*](#) this week, Aiden Pink writes that “one of the most important concepts in Judaism is *pikuach nefesh*, the principle that preserving life trumps almost every other religious rule. Accordingly, in response to the coronavirus, rabbis across the country are doing what had previously been unimaginable—telling community members not to come to Shabbat services in order to slow the spread of the disease.” Some of these leaders had no choice. Governors in several states last week began to ban mass gatherings, and more have followed suit since. But many other religious leaders around the country are taking similar precautions on their own, citing *pikuach nefesh*.

Faithful Muslims who have saved for years to travel to Mecca for the Hajj or Umrah pilgrimages are canceling their trips, as access to the holy sites is limited and concern for the preservation of life is, again, a primary concern of the faithful. As [one pilgrim](#) explained, “It’s not if we could go. The question is: Should we be going? As citizens of the world should we be going in an area where the virus is already there, being in an area where the spread of disease can be more dangerous... Being conscientious of others is part of our faith. And that I think is important. And that’s what I try and teach the kids. We’re doing this for others, right? We’re doing this because we don’t want to promote the spread of disease.”

Even Plum Village, Thich Nhat Hanh’s practice center in France, has temporarily closed to the public. “We recognise that, as a spiritual community and a place of refuge, we have a social responsibility to protect the wellbeing, safety, and happiness of our visiting guests and residential community,” they write. Sanghas, temples, and Buddhist churches posted similar messages.

Many Buddhist teachers have had a significant online presence for years; several websites promise additional online meditation opportunities, webinars, and conferences to help followers engage their practice, in order to help heal the world’s suffering at this critical time. The Portland Insight Meditation Center in Portland, Oregon, shared the following twenty-second handwashing loving-kindness (*metta*) meditation on their Facebook page:

*As you wash your hands, you could practice loving-kindness.*

*“May all beings be safe.*

*May all beings be content.*

*May all beings be healthy.*

*May all beings live with ease.”*

*That’s about 20 seconds, right?*

Denominational leaders and pastors of Christian congregations around the world pivoted from holding services as usual to posting virtual worship services online in less than a week’s time, urging their communities to stay home as an expression of their responsibility to care “for the least of these,” those members of their wider communities who are most vulnerable to the spread of disease. While congregations of young adults led the way with their virtual virtuosity—many of these communities have had a significant online presence since their inception—congregations of all sizes and ages have begun posting sermons, prayers, and music on user-friendly platforms. Many congregations have extended that virtual presence to offerings of daily prayers and meditations, online study groups, and virtual coffee hours, dinnertimes, or pastoral visits.

These communities’ willingness to live their prayers by staying away from their customary sanctuaries is powerful testimony. Even more so are the ways that faith leaders are extending their respective tradition’s wisdom further, braiding treasured practices of prayer and meditation with spiritual practices of care and concern for the other.

The Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky of B’nai David-Judea Congregation, one of several Los Angeles rabbis who canceled his services, was quoted in the [Forward article](#) referenced above urging congregants to stay in touch with each other even while keeping their physical distance. “Every hand that we don’t shake must become a phone call that we place... Every embrace that we avoid must become a verbal expression of warmth and concern. Every inch and every foot that we physically place between ourselves and another, must become a thought as to how we might be of help to that other, should the need arise.”

Chanequa Walker-Barnes, Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling in the McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University, reminds congregations that “it’s not enough to cancel: people still need care.” Her [video presentation](#) models this care at its best, as she includes accurate and accessible information about the epidemic itself alongside theologically rich teaching and pointed ethical and practical suggestions.

Recognizing that the prescription of “social distancing” can lead to social and spiritual isolation as well, religious communities are practicing “spacial solidarity” instead. They are organizing members to care for one another and their wider community in both quotidian and imaginative ways, without inhabiting the same physical space.

Catalogs of opportunities are springing up on many congregations’ websites, including suggestions such as making phone calls to check in on those living alone, offering online teaching modules for out-of-school children of harried parents, making casseroles to share with neighbors, creating “errand pools” so that the most vulnerable folks can remain at home, or raising bond funds to relieve detainees from extended stays in jail as they await indefinitely postponed court dates in unsafe surroundings. The genius of congregations at their best is, of course, their embodiment of communal ways of being, and if these early reports are any indication, generations of caregiving have prepared these practitioners deeply and well for this present moment.

There were those communities of faith, of course, that chose to follow their President’s lead by gathering for in-person prayer. The pastor of [one Miami megachurch](#) used his virtual capabilities to shame congregants into showing up for worship on the National Day of Prayer. In a now-deleted Facebook video that was broadcast to millions of followers, Pastor Guillermo Maldonado downplayed fears of exposure and advised parishioners who were thinking of skipping the Sunday service, “You have two choices. Come in and receive your healing, or stay home and miss out on it.”

Maldonado, who has previously expressed his admiration for Trump’s approach to the religious community and has served as a religious advisor to the president, concluded Sunday’s two-and-a-half-hour service with a salute to his patron: “I think Mr. President is watching right now. Mr. President, Donald Trump is watching the service. Can you put your hands together, please?” Reportedly, Maldonado’s congregation “put their hands together” and clapped for the president after they’d put their hands together in prayer.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his [Letters and Papers from Prison](#), mused on unholy alliances that masquerade as piety, and the misbegotten notions of God that are born of such assignments. In a letter a few weeks before his death, Bonhoeffer wrote, “So our coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as people who manage our lives without God. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us. The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually” (p. 479).

These are hard words, and often misunderstood, but they do not reflect a pastor’s crisis of faith. Rather, they speak into our times as a warning and a promise. The warning, of course, is not to make God so small as to be the puppet of a president or a foil for human failure. And the promise is that “the God who lets us live in the world without a working hypothesis of God” will inspire fresh soundings of the depths of faithfulness, allow new glimpses of the capacity of the human spirit, and reveal, yet again, the indomitable nature of human community that is revealed in seasons of grave challenge such as our own. ♦

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[Sightings](#) is edited by Joel Brown, a PhD Candidate in Religions in the Americas at the Divinity School. Sign up [here](#) to receive *Sightings* via email. You can also follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Marty Center or its editor.

*Image: Father Giuseppe Corbari, priest of the Saints Quirico and Giulitta parish in Robbiano, Italy, celebrates Mass in front of photos of his parishioners that he taped to the empty pews in light of restrictions due to the coronavirus outbreak. (Photo: Courtesy of Father Giuseppe Corbari)*



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