



March 7, 2020

Dear Partners in Ministry,

In just the past few days I've seen many advisories in response to the spread of the coronavirus, including several letters from bishops to their synods, and from pastors to their congregation. This of course is understandable, as we seek to respond appropriately to concerns about how to exercise care over the gatherings of people in our care. Some are pretty long and some pretty technical. I borrow – with permission – some advice from Bishop Guy Erwin in California, and Pastor Rebecca Ninke here in this synod.

Among Bishop Erwin's counsel:

Remain calm and encourage others to be calm. The spread of new flu-like viruses of varying virulence is an annual event. We can rely on public health agencies to keep us informed on the disease's progress and give us basic precautionary information. Be calm: there is every likelihood that this will be no more severe than the seasonal flu (which, people often forget, also brings a significant number of deaths each year). Constant repetition of media reports and news of illness throughout the world can make the situation seem much worse than it actually is. Our duty to our families and neighbors is to take the virus seriously, but to not allow ourselves to react in panic and alarm. Others may depend on your own calmness; practice it. Encourage everyone to monitor their own health; if someone develops any flu-like symptoms, they should seek medical help, let others know, and stay home.

Treat this like any flu epidemic. Be vigilant in washing your hands often and thoroughly, and/or use hand sanitizer. Try not to touch your face, be cautious about touching surfaces in public places; cover your coughs and sneezes with your elbow and avoid unnecessary handshaking and hugging. Be more aware than usual of things you touch and handle. Thorough hand washing with soap on a regular basis is much to be recommended, especially often after shaking hands, blowing your nose, using door handles, etc.

Continue to observe a holy Lent. Our public lives and churchgoing need not change significantly. Simply remember that in a public place, together with numbers of other people and touching many things that others have touched, it is important to be careful. In church, specifically...

- Suspend handshaking/sharing the peace until flu season is over
- Consider taking the offering in ways other than passing the plate along the pew
- Use individual cups for communion – more sanitary than either intinction or common cup. Remind people who may prefer to receive only the bread of our teaching that each element is complete and sufficient in itself to communicate to us God's grace and healing in the sacrament.
- Do extra cleaning of door handles, bathrooms, etc. with bleach and/or sanitizers
- Request Lenten dinner participants to use hand sanitizer generously and do frequent hand-washing. Avoid open bowls for chips, etc.; use utensils only for self-serving.

Bishop Erwin, a Reformation scholar, adds this (a similar piece appeared recently in *Christianity Today*): “Centuries ago in 1527, facing a virulent plague far more deadly than the one that challenges us right now, Martin Luther told his people that even when in danger themselves, their first duty is the love of neighbor to which Jesus calls us all. It is foolish, he taught, not to take common-sense precautions; it is equally foolish to allow exaggerated fears to separate us from those we might be able to help, or to cause us to be concerned only for ourselves. In this Lenten season we are already called to a deeper consciousness of our own fragility and mortality and our need for God and one another—let us pray and trust that God will bring us and all our people safely and in comfort to their Easter hope.”

Grace and Peace,

Rev. Peter Rogness
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