

Coronavirus Advisory, Precautions, and Practices

Update as of Friday, March 20, 12:30pm

To: Dearest members, friends, and community of Presbyterian Chestertown
From: Rev. Joel L. Tolbert

Last night, Thursday, March 19, I called a special Session meeting of Presbyterian Chestertown. We widely and wisely spread out from one another all across the sanctuary. We carefully considered the medical realities and scientific advice regarding being community through this CoViD-19 pandemic. We wondered with one another how best to alter our ministries and programs to protect and preserve human life.

The Session made the following decisions regarding the business, ministries, finances, and programs of the church, effective today:

- Postpone all in-person worship services, and attempt to provide virtual worship.
- Suspend weekly morning and evening prayer services on church property.
- Suspend all Fellowship dinners, including Maundy Thursday, and fellowship hour.
- Suspend all face-to-face Education ministries and groups (children, youth, and adults), with encouragement to meet virtually.
- Expand our communications channels and social media platforms, in preparation for communicating virtual gatherings and conversations.
- Disburse 1st quarter mission dollars to Good Neighbor and Samaritan, delay all others.
- Allow Winter Shelter to continue until the end of March, provided they continue CDC safety guidelines and do not accept any new guests.
- Suspend all outside groups from meetings on church property through the end of April; including Kent Quilters, AA, Yoga, Rebuilding Together, Friday AM Men's, and Chorale.
- Strongly encourage staff to work from home as much as possible.
- Continue Staff compensation and long term contracts, but hold other spending unless the Treasurer approves.
- Fully compensate Wayne, church custodian, for extra hours worked to disinfect.
- Encourage members to continue supporting the church financially by mailing checks, or by electronic payment such as our [PayPal](#) or their own Bill Pay system.

The Diaconate, or Board of Deacons, also brainstormed and imagined ways they can help us continue being church while we are under this new normal of social distancing. The Deacons made the following decisions regarding their care and prayer ministries:

- Touch base with members on our visiting list through cards and calls.
- Extend our efforts to touch base with members outside our visiting list.
- Compile a prayer list and biblical verses to share with members .
- Drop off flowers/food/treats at doors of homebound.
- Activate the Deacons' "Freezer food" for homebound or others who may need it.
- Continue being the smiling faces and listening ears to those around us.
- Volunteer with food delivery and packing for Food Pantry, Backpack, and Worton.
- Consider adding and answering a phone number for 24/7 contact with the church.
- Consider adding and answering a new email for direct requests for help from the church.

I am so proud of and impressed by the strong minds and soft hearts of your Elders, Deacons, and Staff. In this time of great turmoil, heightened sensitivity, and legitimate fear, they carefully listened to you, one another, and God, and made faithful difficult decisions with one another.

After our business decisions were done, we spent a little while listening to one another ache and grieve for what we were losing, the face to face community, the hugs and handshakes, the traditions of togetherness and hospitality. We felt the pre-grief in ourselves, and let ourselves feel it and name it. We held it before God. Then, we felt the same in you, our members and friends. We imagined how you might feel something similar; isolated from others and your routines, now being told even church, big or little, is being postponed until further notice. We prayed for you and for ourselves that God might soon begin to reveal the light on the horizon as a guide for our way out of this shadowy valley.

As Caitlan and I sent us back into the night with prayer, we sent the Elders home with another request... Should you find yourself wanting to say one more thing to the wider church after tonight's meeting as we head into this time of separation and uncertainty, what would you say?

Here are just a few of their thoughts, feelings, prayers, and reflections for you...

"I keep coming back to love. I know this is a scary time, and a sad time, but it's important to remember that a church is not a building - a church is God's people gathering together. God tells us wherever two or more gather in my name, so am I. One of the best things about PCC is the love we have for one another. Even while we are separated we show each other love through cards, emails, phone calls. This is our time to shine! We WILL get through this because we LOVE one another and love is the strongest force in the world. Have faith!"

"Knowing we were doing what is right for the good of our church community didn't make the difficult decisions made by Session last night any easier. The decisions we made saddened us all, but they were made with love and concern for the care of you, our congregation, the heart of PCC."

"Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. So many of us learned these words during our continuing journey of faith, and they are particularly appropriate as a source of spiritual strength during these turbulent times currently around us... keep in touch with your fellow congregants, community, and pastoral staff via telephone, email or other social media sources... Stay positive, be safe and remember Jesus loves YOU, this YOU know for the Bible tells YOU so!"

"... until the current crisis has resolved, we must all bottom line STAY HOME. Although it will be painful to not physically worship and eat and laugh and teach and serve together, for the greater good we must forgo those joys for the foreseeable future. Despite the lack of reported cases of COVID-19 virus in Kent and Queen Anne's counties, rest assured the virus is here and amongst us. As we walk in the shadow of the valley of death for the next few weeks and months, remember these comforting words from God himself, when God said to Joshua, "...I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you"... We look forward to that glorious day when we can once again worship in our sanctuary and lift our voices in praise to our Almighty God!"

"I think of our Church as an extended family. We support each other through thick and thin. Even if we are physically apart, we are always bonded in spirit."

"As we stay home to keep safe while we struggle with the new normal, let us first and foremost resolve to look for the joy in each and every day. Walk around your home and really look at it - the things you have on your walls, the items you have saved on your

tabletops, the greening and flowering in your yard or on your windowsill. Make a list and give thanks in prayer for all the joy that surrounds you even while you remain in place. Then pray that others may find it, too.”

“... this morning... I had a heavy heart...not sure why, but I think it’s because I was reflecting on our decisions last night to suspend worship and our in person interactions... it will be a journey, and undoubtedly with a few unexpected turns and ups and downs, but one taken with caring about one another and hopefully a good dose of laughter thrown in... Yes, “social distancing” is a change but also an opportunity to refocus and get creative about how to let people know you care. I’m working myself to the point of really seeing this as an opportunity. I’m focusing on things I’m grateful for, instead what I don’t have access to... “This is the day that the Lord hath made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.” Pretty profound. At my house already today we’ve had bright sunshine, a little rain, slight breeze making the wind chimes sing with the doors open and the temp is getting warmer! Yay! Spring is on its way! And with it, Hope!”

Now, we head into the desert together. We grieve what is behind us. We do not know yet how far or how long the journey is in front of us. We walk this road not just for the safety of ourselves. By taking these decisions, we are doing our very best to participate in the movement that is saving hundreds of thousands if not millions of lives. I am grateful to be with you and among you on this journey toward a sunrise, a promised land, and new community. God, thy kingdom, come, sooner rather than later.

Blessing, laughter, and loving be yours,
Rev. Joel L. Tolbert

On behalf of the Session of the Presbyterian Church of Chestertown,

Rev Joel Tolbert, Pastor/Moderator

Joanne Clarke, Elder

Bob Jackson, Elder

Melissa McIntire, Elder

Lanny Parks, Elder

Lansing Williams, Elder

Rev. Caitlan Gartland, Pastor

Letha Hammon, Elder

Scott Loveless, Elder

Chuck Miller, Elder

Doug West, Elder

Ruth Vietri-Green, Clerk