

Out of an abundance of care and concern for the health and well-being of the Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church community, this document has been created to guide us in the implementation of best practices during the current outbreak of the Corona virus strain known as COVID-19. We take these steps in solidarity with local school systems and other community groups so that we can help to slow the spread of the coronavirus outbreak. By doing so, we are following Jesus' commandment to love our neighbor, including those most vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 and those who work as first responders, medical personnel, and other caregivers. It is important to note that these changes are only temporary and are being utilized in order to reduce the risk of transmission and protect the most vulnerable members of our community.

COVID-19 Prevention & Mitigation Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church, Sparta, NJ

I. Overview

A. Resources

1. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and World Health Organization (WHO) will be considered our primary resources for information and recommendations.
2. Secondary sources of information may include the health department, local hospitals and school districts, the ELCA Churchwide organization, and the New Jersey Synod.

B. Communication

1. Important and time sensitive information will be released primarily via email, social media, and the church website.
2. Phone calls and text messaging will be used as a secondary form of communication.
3. Reminders will be shared via bulletin insert, worship slides, and verbal announcements whenever possible.

C. Hand Washing

1. Everyone is encouraged to use proper hand washing techniques as often as possible. The best defense against the spread of illness is to wash your hands with soap and water for 20 seconds (the time it takes to pray the Lord's Prayer).
2. Hand sanitizer is only for those times when you don't have access to soap and water.
3. Keep your hands away from your face (eyes, nose, and mouth) and be sure to cough/sneeze into your elbow.

D. Illness Protocol

1. Signs and Symptoms

- a. COVID-19: fever, cough, shortness of breath, symptoms appear 2-14 days after exposure
- b. Influenza: fever, cough, chills, sweats, congestion, sore throat, fatigue, weakness, muscle aches
- c. Allergies: sneezing, itchy nose or eyes, runny nose, watery eyes

2. COVID-19 Higher Risk Category

- a. Older Adults: The CDC considers this to be anyone over the age of 60 years old.
- b. Chronic Illness: diabetes, heart conditions, respiratory problems (including lung diseases such as asthma), those under treatment for cancer, any condition that weakens the immune system
- c. Immunocompromised: anyone with an immune system that is impaired or weakened either through medication or illness; those with compromised immune systems have a reduced ability to fight infections and diseases (like Coronavirus).

3. If you are sick, please stay home. We can't emphasize this enough. At this time, we want to be cautious and help prevent the potential spread of illness. This applies to church staff as well as volunteers and members.

4. If you are in the CDC's "higher risk" category, we understand if you feel the need to stay home during this time. Please let us know how we can best support you.

5. If you or someone you know is sick, please let the Pastor or church office staff know. Please don't visit the sick yourself unless you are a trained health professional.

E. Offering

1. Please continue to give offering. When this is over, we still want to have a church. We support mission and ministry in the United States and the world through our giving in addition to providing salaries for staff and the upkeep of our facility.

2. Offering can be dropped off, sent through electronic fund transfer via Vanco or Venmo), mailed to the office, or you can request your bank to send a check.

II. Stage 1 Protocols

A. Worship

1. Passing of the Peace: Will we suspend shaking hands or hugging during the passing of the peace. You are invited to bow to each other or simply use the words, "Peace be with you". Unscented hand sanitizer is available in the pews for worshippers to use before and after passing the peace. Many of our members are sensitive to strong smells, if you are bringing hand sanitizer from home please ensure that it is unscented.
2. Offering: Offering plates will not be passed. They will be placed on tables that people will pass on their way into the sanctuary. Anyone handling the plates or what's contained in them (i.e. counters and whomever sets the plates out) will need to follow hand washing protocols.
3. Greeting: The Pastor will not be shaking hands after worship. Members are encouraged to refrain from handshaking and other physical contact at this time.
4. Worship Materials: Bulletins will be recycled after being used by a single person.
5. Baptismal Font: The Baptismal font was previously emptied of water to remind us that Lent is historically a time of preparation for Baptismal candidates. It will remain empty until this precautionary time is ended.

B. Holy Communion

1. Everyone assisting with communion will wash their hands with soap and water in the sacristy prior to setting the table.
2. Church goers will be released by ushers to come forward, but they will go directly to the pastor/communion assistant with the bread/wafers.
3. Those involved in the set-up and/or clean-up of communion (filling cups, putting out bread, setting the altar) should follow proper handwashing protocols and use the nitrile gloves provided in the sacristy.

III. Stage 2 Protocols

A. Events and Activities

1. In general, the cancellation of church events and activities, including worship, will be made under the guidance of the CDC and/or the health department. Recommendations from other sources will be considered by the pastor and Congregational Council president.
2. Team and task group leaders are trusted to make decisions about their meetings that fit their needs and comfort level. Please make sure that changes to meetings, especially cancellations, are quickly communicated to the Pastor and office staff.

3. Those who conduct other programs such as Bible studies, choir rehearsals, and other small groups that meet at the church should make decisions with their groups that best fit the needs and comfort level of the group members. All groups should immediately inform the Pastor and church staff of cancellations. Please note that the pastor and Congregational Council president reserve the right to cancel events at any time.
4. Please consider utilizing programs like Zoom, Facebook messenger, and FaceTime to still have meetings even if you choose not to meet in person.

IV. Stage 3 Protocols

A. Cancellation Protocol

1. If, at any point, the congregation needs to cancel worship, we will communicate this information as quickly as possible via email, social media, and the church website.
2. If possible, we should do our best to communicate with local television and radio stations about closing. Some members, without access to internet, will need to be called, please let Pastor know immediately if you need a phone call.

B. Digital Worship

1. The Pastor will plan to lead an abbreviated online worship service in the event that regular worship services are cancelled.
2. Online services will be available for viewing on the church Facebook page and may include scripture, prayer, a message, and hymns that are in the public domain.
3. A print worship resource will be available via email and on the church website for those without access to Facebook.

Thank you for your understanding and your care for those who are most vulnerable. For now we sit in Stage 2 of our protocol system. However, this is a quickly evolving situation and I'd ask you to pay close attention to email, Facebook and the church website for further updates.

O God, where hearts are fearful and constricted,
grant courage and hope.
Where anxiety is infectious and widening,
grant peace and reassurance.
Where impossibilities close every door and window,

grant imagination and resistance.
Where distrust twists our thinking,
grant healing and illumination.
Where spirits are daunted and weakened,
grant soaring wings and strengthened dreams.
All these things we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
(Evangelical Lutheran Worship, p. 76)

In Christ,

The Reverend Kristina Reyes