

March 14, 2020

Dear Sisters and Brothers of Pittsburgh Presbytery,

Grace and peace to you all in our Lord Jesus, especially during this season of upheaval caused by the spread of the coronavirus COVID-19. Much that is momentous has transpired since I first communicated with you about this a couple of weeks ago. We now know we are facing a full-fledged nationwide emergency. Today Governor Wolf indicated that there are now cases of infection in and around Allegheny County.

In the lengthy letter below I address the following:

- Presbytery office closure
- Suspension of all presbytery committee meetings, with optional videoconferencing
- Cancellation of the May 14 presbytery meeting at Westminster Presbyterian Church
- Counsel concerning modifying or canceling church meetings, including Sunday worship
- Counsel on increasing our care for each other when we are absent from each other
- Links to regional and national church and governmental resources for dealing with the virus outbreak

One of the “Great Ends of the Church” is to provide for the “shelter of the people of God.” (*Book of Order* F-1.0304) In 1 Peter 5:1-2, the apostle writes, “Now as an elder myself... I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge...” What responsibilities do our elders have to provide due shelter to their flocks in our present circumstance? And what responsibilities do we have to our wider communities to assure that the church is *not* a place that harbors the spread of a virus that reaches into the surrounding community? How do we best exercise our responsibility both to care for our flock and to seek the welfare of the city in which we live ([Jeremiah 29:7](#))?

Each session must consider whether they need to curtail some, or perhaps even all meetings on church premises until the virus spread subsides. Some of our sessions have already determined temporarily to cancel all meetings, including Sunday worship. Others are continuing with Sunday worship, while suspending other meetings. Still others are opening only for support group meetings such as Alcoholics Anonymous. For any in-person meetings, every precaution must be taken against transmission of any virus. This includes how we greet each other, and how we handle things that we pass to others, including offering plates, communion trays, bulletins, and hymnals. If technology permits, using a screen instead of bulletins and hymnals is a commendable option. Livestreaming worship services is also an option that some of our congregations offer. Please know that presbytery will support the decisions your session makes to shelter your community from the spread of this virus. The only decision we would gravely discourage is to continue with “business as usual.”

I encourage us to think not only of what we might prudently curtail for a season, but also where we might expand our commitments to our life together. Perhaps we’ll not meet for a meal, but

could be more vigilant to bring meals to the sick and elderly who must be especially mindful of the need to shelter in place. Perhaps we'll not hear a pastoral prayer on Sunday, but we could develop a prayer network where we all pray regularly for one another, as well as for the church and world beyond our congregation. Perhaps we'll not gather to hear the Word proclaimed, but we can increase our messaging by telephone, mail, and online from church leaders to their constituents. Perhaps we won't see each other face to face, but we can raise our game of communicating well by other means as an act of mutual care and value.

The Stated Clerk of the General Assembly has issued an [Advisory Opinion](#) concerning constitutionally-sound options for gathering (or not gathering) for congregations, committees, and councils of the church. It also includes helpful pastoral counsel.

An updated list of news and counsel concerning the coronavirus spread is maintained by the PCUSA at <https://www.pcusa.org/covid19/>. Our Synod also has a site including more regional resources related to this crisis at <http://www.syntrinity.org/coronavirus-resources/>. Rev. Susan Krummel, Executive of the Presbytery of Chicago, has put together [a wonderful pastoral resource](#) for sessions during the spread of COVID-19.

Please note that the presbytery office will be closed at least until April 1. Our staff will continue to monitor all calls and emails from home, and are considered "on the job" while working from home. Do not hesitate to contact any of us. We will communicate with you again about office hours after April 1.

Our Moderator, Senior Vice-Moderator, and Stated Clerk have joined me in deciding that it is prudent for us to cancel the scheduled May 14 meeting of Pittsburgh Presbytery. Please be assured that no necessary business will be left unattended, and that suspension of this meeting does not violate either the *Book of Order* or the "Manual of Pittsburgh Presbytery." If it seems advisable, a called meeting of the presbytery during the summer could be convened.

The chairs of our core committees join me in announcing that all in-person committee meetings and subcommittee meetings will either be suspended or will be moved to online teleconference, through May 31. Our office will communicate each committee's precise plans to committee members. I also urge that all ministry team meetings be suspended or convened online through the same period. The Stated Clerk's office is canceling all session minutes readings through the end of May.

At the national church level, national offices will begin moving toward complete closure next week. General Assembly registration has been pushed back for a second time, with registration now opening "April 20 at the latest." The Synod of the Trinity will decide next week what it will do about upcoming synod-related events.

If any of your members would like to participate in a Presbyterian worship service on Sunday morning from home, I am aware of three of our congregations that livestream their worship

services at 11:00 a.m. on Sunday: [Southminster Presbyterian Church](#), [East Liberty Presbyterian Church](#), and [Community Presbyterian Church of Ben Avon](#).

May God help you stay strong, may your faith and hope grow, and may you remain secure as this storm passes through our midst.



Sheldon Sorge, General Minister

Co-signing this letter:

Carla Campbell, Stated Clerk

Charissa Howe, Moderator of Presbytery

Mark Roth, Senior Vice-Moderator of Presbytery

Carol Divens Roth and Jeff Tindall, Co-Chairs, Executive Committee

Robert Walkup, Chair, Commission on Preparation for Ministry

Frank Hancock and Tara Thompson, Co-Chairs, Commission on Ministry

Tammy Wiens and Barbara Prevost, Co-Chairs, Nominations Committee