



*“For God has **not** given us the **spirit of fear**;
but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.”*

2 Timothy 1:7

March 12, 2020

Dear Partners in Christ's Service,

You have been on my heart and mind so much in these last few days. As we have all been inundated with the continual, evolving stories and headlines about the COVID-19 health crisis, it has been difficult to maintain a balance between being well informed and cautious *and* being overly fixated and anxious. In times of uncertainty, there is a tendency to want to have certain absolute answers and sweeping solutions.

Yet, the truth is we are in a place of uncertainty of what will unfold. So while I believe it is our moral, ethical and social responsibility to make sure we are practicing good preventative measures to reduce the risk of spreading the virus, I also believe as people of faith we have a spiritual responsibility not to spread perhaps a more dangerous virus.

The more dangerous virus I see spreading is FEAR. Fear of the unknown. Fear of not being prepared. Fear of not having enough (whether that is--knowledge, resources or even supplies). And fear that the worst will happen. Yet, as we are reminded by the words and message of 2 Timothy 1:7, “*God has NOT given us the spirit of fear.*” Rather, God gives us (if we are willing to receive it) the spirit of “*love and sound mind.*” What might a spirit of “*love and sound mind*” look like?

The spirit of love can serve to remind us to love ourselves and love others during this time.

Some important loving practices would be:

Practice good hygiene.

Don't underestimate the importance of washing hands and keeping your environment clean and sanitized.

Practice good self-care.

Go back to the basics. Eat good food. Get good sleep. Get fresh air. Take plenty of breaks for rest and renewal. Go to the doctor if you are feeling sick.

Practice loving common sense.

When you cough or sneeze, cover your mouth. If you are sick, stay home.

Practice good modeling.

Do not feel like you have to apologize for modeling good physical distancing during this time. Encourage your members to do the same.

Practice humility and grace.

Be willing to be honest and open about how this is a new moment for all of us. Most of us have not ministered during a pandemic before and do not know what to expect. Remind yourself and others we

will do the best we can in each moment and each stage as things change and unfold. If you do not know something, do be not afraid to admit this and ask for help.

Just as the spirit of sound mind can serve to remind us, keep a proper perspective.

Some sound practices would be:

Practice perspective.

Continue to educate yourself and others about what is happening in your own community and context, as well as keeping informed about what is happening nationally and globally.

Practice flexible and fluid decision-making.

Talk with your leadership and make decisions about what you will do in this moment and what you might do in anticipation if the realities of your context change. Keep in mind you do not have to have all the answers and do not have to address every potential concern.

Practice erring on the side of safety.

There will be some will question certain decisions. This is true in every time and every circumstance. However, stand firm in your resolve to protect the people you are called to serve.


Practice developing safe spaces to vent, unwind, and process.

As leaders, you are called to be a non-anxious presence in this moment. This does not mean you are not entitled nor will experience your own fears and anxieties. Find appropriate places and spaces to express this. Reach out to colleagues and tap into your support systems to process, ponder, and pray.

Above all, please know your Conference is here to support you in these days.

You are not alone. May we faithfully walk together in these days with a spirit “not of fear,” but of “love and sound mind.”

In Christ’s love,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rev. Shana Johnson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rev. Shana Johnson
Conference Minister

INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

Information through our denomination

Our national setting of our denomination is now treating this crisis as a national disaster. It is consulting and coordinating with FEMA in its response, and is taking steps to add a staff member to the national staff who will specifically coordinate our response.

It is also working to model best practice by reviewing each meeting and event requiring UCC members and staff to travel and making decisions about what must be cancelled or handled differently. The UCC website has a page dedicated to the COVID-19 situation which is being regularly updated.

https://www.ucc.org/disaster_coronavirus_resources_from_the_ucc

The Council of Conference Ministers is also in regular communication to provide updates from our various locations, share resources, and consult about best practices for our Conference and churches.

Websites to monitor

The Illinois Department of Health

<http://www.dph.illinois.gov>

and Center for Disease Control

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

These websites remain our best sources for accurate and regularly updated information.

The CDC has particular guidance for community and faith-based organizations you might review

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/summary.html>.

Local Church Considerations

Right Now:

Advise members and staff not to attend worship services and other church events **if they are ill**. Encourage those at higher risk for more serious COVID-19 illness to self-monitor and be especially vigilant. Those at higher risk are older adults and people who have severe chronic medical conditions.

Continue to make pastoral visits if you remain healthy, but follow basic precautions when doing so and pay attention to the advice of hospitals and care centers about whether visits in those facilities are advisable.

Discontinue shaking of hands during the 'passing of the peace' and when congregants come and go from services and gatherings, encourage an alternative such as a smile/nod/hands over the heart.

Re-think your communion practices and how you receive the offering to minimize contact.

Supply tissues and alcohol-based sanitizing hand gel at worship services and gatherings.

Provide bins for disposal of tissues at gatherings.

Ensure hand-washing facilities, including soap and disposable towels, are well maintained.

Ensure all hard surfaces that are frequently touched (such door handles, hand rails, faucets and pews) are cleaned regularly with a household detergent or disinfectant wipes.

Reconsider your sick leave policies for staff members during this time. Many people will often go to work sick because they do not have enough sick time. Encourage staff to stay home when they are sick. Also allow for flex time in encouraging staff to work from home when possible.

Thinking ahead:

If a COVID-19 outbreak should occur in your community, it could last for several weeks, at which time public health officials may recommend community action to reduce spread, exposure, and severity of the disease.

That may include discouraging all gatherings over a certain number, which could directly affect our ability to gather for worship or other events. (For example, this has already occurred in parts of Washington state, where UCC and other churches have been advised to discontinue gathering for worship for now.)

While we are currently a long ways from this and hope this will not be the case in the Illinois South Conference, we should nonetheless think now about how to respond should that occur here.

Decision-making: Be clear about who will make decisions about canceling worship or other events and how those decisions will be determined and then communicated more broadly.

Communication: What mechanisms do you have in place to efficiently communicate with all your members about the status of worship and other events? If you have social media platforms or email lists, be sure you have current information and encourage everyone in your congregation to join your social media platforms if they can.

Finances: If worship cannot occur for some period of time, and weekly offerings are not taken, do you have a way for your members to give electronically? Do you have any reserves that can help you meet a shortfall in income so that essential expenses can still be met? How will people be paid in a timely way?

Caring and connecting: If worship and other gatherings cannot take place, how can you continue to connect and care for one another? Do you have social media or other communications through which you can provide outreach and care?

Can you post or email sermons and devotions for spiritual encouragement, or perhaps live-stream messages or some form of worship on Facebook or ZOOM? How will you and your congregation check in on those who live alone or might otherwise be most vulnerable to illness?

Insurance: Does your church have insurance that might include a clause providing for business interruption coverage or other coverage in this kind of situation? Check with your provider now to ask.

Renters: If you have organizations renting or otherwise utilizing your building, be sure to communicate with them about how your church and their organization will communicate and cooperate during this time.