

BALTIMORE-WASHINGTON CONFERENCE



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Bishop LaTrelle Easterling
BISHOP, WASHINGTON EPISCOPAL AREA

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March 12, 2020

UPDATE:

Following this afternoon's press conference by Maryland Governor Larry Hogan in which he declared a state of emergency, Bishop Easterling is directing all United Methodist churches in the state of Maryland to not gather in their church buildings for two weeks; for conference camps and archives to close, and for the Mission Center building to close. Conference Center staff will work remotely.

Bishop Easterling also encourages churches in West Virginia to make safety and their congregants' well-being a top priority. Please maintain appropriate personal space, and be alert to any announcements by state officials.

United Methodists throughout the conference should be checking on their neighbors and offering pastoral care to those in need whom they encounter.

To the leaders of the churches of the Baltimore-Washington Conference:

As the community of faith, we are called to practice wise and nimble leadership as we address the challenges created by COVID-19, also known as the coronavirus. Within the last 24 hours, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic. This pandemic calls upon each of us to make choices to protect those in our congregations and communities.

As faith leaders, we must particularly safeguard those we shepherd who are vulnerable, including children, those over the age of 60, and those who suffer with chronic health conditions. The decisions we make and the actions we take in these moments could have consequences well beyond our sanctuaries.

We know that the Baltimore-Washington Conference covers a large geographic area, with differing levels of risk and contagion. Therefore, a blanket policy for the entire conference would not be the best approach.

The governor of the state of Maryland, Gov. Larry Hogan, has declared a state of emergency, as has the Mayor of Washington, D.C., Muriel Bowser. These leaders, along with the DC Department of Health recommend the cessation of large gatherings. In light of these developments, I am requesting that our churches within the District of Columbia refrain from gathering for worship in their buildings for the next two weeks.

For those in other regions of our conference, I am asking that you intentionally and prayerfully discern how you might best address worship in your context. Some churches in our conference are providing live-streaming, or using Zoom (to allow people without robust technology to phone in) to broadcast worship. This alternative allows us to continue worshipping together while also being responsible citizens. I trust that each of you will remain well-informed and will make sound decisions based on the situation as it unfolds in your geographic area.

I would urge you to consider that not everyone in your community is able or willing to make the best or most prudent decisions in regard to this pandemic. In light of this, I hope you, as a leader, will take on the task of caring for the welfare and health of the entire body.

I know that these are difficult decisions. We will continue to monitor the situation and make updated recommendations based upon the best information available at the time. We are working with experts in this area to inform our discernment and policy-making. You have my support and my prayers in the days and weeks ahead. I ask you to pray for one another and for all those who might be sick or in peril.

As United Methodists, we know how to connect as one in times of trouble and crisis. We know how to lean on God and one another, and we know how to rise as powerful witnesses to take bold action on behalf of all of God's people. Together, let us take the steps and do all we can to address the spread of the virus, with the assurance that perfect love casts out all fear.

Blessings and peace,

Bishop LaTrelle Miller Easterling

Baltimore-Washington Conference

e-connection

March 13, 2020

BWC Responds to Coronavirus

Prayers and preparation continue as area United Methodist churches continue to respond to the coronavirus.

Ben Trawick and Rev. Chris Bishop have written a very helpful overview for churches who will not be meeting in their sanctuaries and want to take their worship services live online. [Learn more](#).

[A resource guide](#) has also been compiled to assist church leaders in their response to COVID-19.

And, an FAQ with questions recently raised by area churches is below and [available on online](#).

We continue to pray for one another and the world, confident that God is with us.

An FAQ for BWC Leaders About the Coronavirus

Responding to the pandemic of the coronavirus has raised questions for many local church leaders. We've compiled an FAQ to address some of the questions Conference leaders have received.

Basic information:

Q: What did Governor Hogan say that prompted Bishop Easterling to direct our churches in Maryland to close?

A: Governor Hogan issued a State of Emergency for the state of Maryland. In his statement, Gov. Hogan stressed that the spread of COVID-19 had entered the mitigation stage and that large gatherings of people pose a threat to public health, especially for those over age 60 and people with health conditions. [See a press release about his statement](#).

Bishop Easterling has also been in consultation with medical practitioners and has been following experts like those at the Centers for Disease Control.

Q: What public health goals should churches be most concerned with?

A: Among the most important public health concerns today are:

1. Stopping or slowing the spread of the virus.
2. Protecting vulnerable populations (our seniors, those with health conditions, and caregivers).

Q: Is there a framework for decision-making that could help local churches in their efforts to stop or slow the spread of the virus?

A: In their decision-making, churches should ask:

1. Is the ministry activity to be held in the church building essential to the congregation or to the community?
If the answer is yes, then how can that ministry be accomplished with public health and safety protected? Will participants be able to maintain social distancing?
If the answer is no, can the activity be rescheduled or are there other ways to accomplish the essential aspects of this ministry activity? (For example with Zoom or Facebook Live)

2. How does the ministry activity affect vulnerable populations? How can they be protected as participants in the activity, or as recipients of the ministry activity, with explicit directions and actions?
3. Who will assume responsibility for overseeing that good hygienic and cleaning practices are implemented and maintained?

Issues about which the churches are asking district superintendents for guidance:

Q: Several churches have inquired about the operations of food pantries, recovery groups, daycare centers, feeding and shelter ministries, and other congregations using a church's space. How should they address these concerns?

A: Again, when making decisions, discern what is essential and act accordingly. If a program or initiative is essential, do as much as possible to protect those participating, including insisting that room be made for social distancing, washing hands, and other recommended public health measures.

Provisions should be made to separate any persons who are ill or exhibit symptoms of illness. If anyone who has been involved in the ministry activity is later diagnosed with COVID-19, that information must be reported to all participants so that appropriate actions may be taken.

If you still have questions or concerns, consult with your district superintendent.

Q: Should church staff (including the pastor) be paid during the time the building is closed? Should this be counted against their personal or sick leave or vacation time?

A: Clergy should still be working, although they may be called upon to use technology more than they usually do. If, during this time, they are sick or on vacation, the appropriate leave should be used. Teleworking is a consideration if it can be accomplished. These decisions are contextual. Remember that those who are most vulnerable are hourly employees; the disruption of their work is not their choice, and so, vacation or personal leave is discouraged. This is a time for as much grace as we can offer, and privileging human beings over finances.

Q: How should pastoral care be addressed?

A: The care of human beings, both physical and spiritual, is always central to our ministry. And, in these extraordinary circumstances, that care must take into consideration the health and well-being of all involved. Pastors should discuss this with their Staff Parish Relations Committee to develop an acceptable protocol within their given context. If pastors or SPRC chairs have questions or concerns, they may contact their district superintendents.

Anticipation of the future and best practices:

Q: What if a church member tests positive, or has someone in their household who has been exposed to COVID-19?

A: As with any illness, this person should seek medical attention and work with doctors to address their symptoms. HIPPA rules concerning patient privacy discourage the sharing of names of people who are sick and the details of their illness. While it may be appropriate to share that someone from your congregation has been exposed to the virus and to hold them in prayer, it is better not to announce or share their name.

Q: Would open-air worship be an acceptable substitute for worshipping in the building?

A: It depends. Current wisdom suggests that each person should remain 6-feet apart from other people to hinder the spread of the virus.

Q: What if a pastor becomes sick?

A: As with any illness, the pastor should seek medical attention and work with doctors to address their symptoms. They should also contact their district superintendent and the Staff-Parish Relations Committee so that the appropriate arrangements can be made.

Concerning Conference actions:

Q: Will there be apportionment relief for churches if this becomes a protracted closure?

A: For the foreseeable future, caring for people and the public health should be everyone's primary concern. The conference will continue to work in partnership with local churches and assess this situation on an ongoing basis as it unfolds.

Q: What date can we reopen?

A: Bishop Easterling's current directive is to keep church buildings closed for two weeks, until Friday, March 27. However, the future of the virus and its effects are uncertain and church leaders are asked to pay attention to future governmental action and communications from the conference.

Please know that we are working diligently to provide ongoing staff support and resources for use throughout the conference. We are also praying for each of you as you work to respond to this pandemic and State of Emergency. May we remember that God is with us and remains our source of strength and comfort.

Submissions?

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