

March 17, 2020

BISHOP'S STATEMENT ON LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

Dear Friends & Colleagues,

First and foremost, I want to express my sincere thanks to each of you who honored my directive to suspend in-person public worship and conduct services on Sunday using tools such as video livestreaming, Facebook Live, conference calls, etc. I spent a good amount of time watching several of you online. I was very proud and deeply pleased with your efforts. Thank you for your ingenuity and faithfulness.

Second, I want to express once again that I have been and continue to be in daily prayer for each of you in leadership and each of our local churches in the New York Annual Conference. These are extraordinary times that demand extraordinary leadership. Thank you for what you are doing.

Please be sure to take good care of yourselves. There will be much asked of us in the days that lie ahead. Please get rest, take necessary precautions, and continue to nurture the health of your soul as you lead. I need you to be your best self in these anxious times.

Third, I want to give you the latest in updated information as well as further instructions on how to move forward in key areas.

Public Services of Worship

Last Friday, after much prayer, introspection and ongoing discussions with experts, I issued the mandate that in the wake of the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Pandemic, all churches in the New York Annual Conference would not hold public services of worship for the next two weeks.

As I noted in my emergency advisory, it was a difficult but necessary decision to minimize and "flatten the curve" of infection and curtail the spread of the COVID-19 (Coronavirus).

Yesterday, the state governments of New York and Connecticut issued a ban of all gatherings of 50 or more persons until further notice. President recommended that everyone avoid contact with groups of more than 10 persons for the next fifteen days.

As a result, I am requiring that all of our churches not conduct public services of worship until April 5, 2020. Churches that have a weekly attendance of 50+ will be required to suspend *all* gatherings until further notice. This includes weddings, funerals, and other social gatherings. There is no debate or question about this. We must and will comply with this directive.

Public Meetings and Group Gatherings

Gatherings of small groups for study, prayer, and smaller worship experiences are acceptable yet must

be undertaken with great care for social distancing (six feet apart), proper disinfecting of meeting space, and extreme attention to safety and hygiene on the part of each person.

The avoidance of public meetings and group gatherings altogether is a best practice to consider whenever possible. What took place in New Rochelle, New York is an example of how quickly this virus can spread because of one individual who found themselves in multiple settings. The use of great caution will bear great fruit in our efforts to lessen the impact of this virus.

Churches are expected to directly address these changes with all groups that use our facilities and have more than the recommended number present at their gatherings. This applies to other denominations, preschools and all renters.

We must be mindful that, in large measure, our constituency falls into the category of the most vulnerable. People over 60 and especially those over the age of 80 are the most susceptible to this virus. They are also, at times, the most resilient and determined. We must show leadership by urging them to stay at home and creating opportunities for them to receive ongoing and meaningful spiritual nurture and care.

Giving Alternatives

Later this week, our Conference Treasurer, Ross Williams, and I will be issuing best practices, thoughts, and concrete suggestions on how we address creative giving alternatives that can be considered and utilized. The church's need for financial support in these challenging times cannot be understated however we must be sensitive as well to the emerging financial challenges many of our people will be facing as well.

The Annual Conference Center

In the wake of the third fatality in New York State in only a matter of days, on Sunday, Governor Andrew Cuomo urged businesses to "aggressively consider" work-from-home strategies and voluntary closures. "Reducing density is both a social responsibility & will help protect workforces," the Governor said, adding, "If businesses do not close voluntarily, his administration will consider mandatory measures."

I met with our Conference Staff and Cabinet members yesterday to announce that our **Conference Center would be implementing a "telecommuting plan" that will result in the closure of our headquarters in White Plains, New York for two weeks, beginning on Tuesday, March 17, 2020.** This will be extended, as necessary, as the crisis continues to unfold.

This is a necessary, protective measure that also provides us time to properly disinfect hard surfaces (computers and technology, office furniture, desktops, etc.) that can transmit the virus. After two weeks, we will reassess and redirect, based on the current status of government efforts to control the spread of the virus.

While the building is closed, the ministry will remain open.

In our meeting today, I stressed to our staff the need for continuity in our ministry and a strong virtual presence among our staff as they continue working to support our Conference mission, vision and core values. All are aware that this is not a closure. Our goal is that there will be no disruption of the services and support that my Conference office team provides to our churches and clergy.

I have been assured that all are currently or in the process of being equipped with the tools, technology, access and strategy to complete their work virtually with a seamless, indistinguishable approach. This means that you can continue to call, e-mail, write and know that you will receive prompt and careful attention to whatever needs you may have.

The New York Annual Conference is blessed with competent, diligent staff that understands the magnitude of their responsibilities to our congregations, lay leadership, and clergy. I am grateful for their willingness to swiftly adapt as we implement updated policies and procedures needed at this time.

The Need for Creative Thinking

As I continue to monitor individual churches and their response to last week's Emergency Advisory, I am heartened by the many who took this moment as an opportunity to think differently about how we worship in our current context using technology to show in creative ways that "church is not the building." We have been longing for and urging our churches to move in this direction for a long time. It is a necessity, in order for the church to be successful in our mission of making disciples for the transformation of the world.

We are eager to hear from you about the creative ways that you are worshipping and connecting with your people. Yesterday morning, I received several inspiring updates from our District Superintendents describing how our pastors Livestreamed worship to reach their congregations, telephone conference calls to reach people without internet access, and ZOOM video conferencing to hold meetings and reach children and youth with online activities while the kids remain out of school.

I feel blessed knowing that God is showing up in our local churches and through our leadership during this crisis. There are multiple illustrations that bear witness to the fact that when we are called to stretch, build and move beyond "business as usual," the result can be better than any of us could ask or think.

As you ponder and pray about the need to continue explore new ways to reach your congregations and implement creative ideas, please consider making use of your Cooperative Parish as a vehicle to lessen the load. Sharing worship responsibilities with your colleagues in a Cooperative Parish extends our public witness and creates a culture of cooperation that can be a blessing to many.

Responding to the Needs of our People

Friends, this is not just a crisis. It has the makings of being a disaster. The church is a critical part of the response as is our obligation to tend to the well being of individuals, the local church, and the wider community.

I had a conversation with our Coordinator of Mission Ministry, Tom Vencuss about the types of things

needed to prepare for a proper and thorough ministry response in the communities you are serve. He offered the recommendations/guidelines from the UMCOR Connecting Neighbors training. We realize that churches may already have some of these protocols in place, but it is important to review them:

1) Identify the most vulnerable persons within your church membership and extended church community. This includes persons with physical limitations or disabilities, emotional needs, family members who are caring for vulnerable persons, persons with limited access to transportation, etc.

2) Establish a "Care Team." Reach out by phone to contact the individuals or families of your congregation(s) to determine their needs and maintain a database of information. The Care Team should maintain regular contact not only for emergency needs but to provide a "caring presence." If your church has a food pantry, use your Care Team to provide emergency provisions on a rationed basis.

3) Identify experienced, caregivers within your congregations. These would include parish nurses, trained nurse practitioners, other medical professionals, and persons trained in "pastoral-care" type ministries, such as Stephen Ministers. If needs are identified by the Care Team – for example, if someone says that they are not feeling well, a nurse may be able to provide an early assessment, direct them to an appropriate call number or website, walk them through the process, and provide a caring Christian presence. If need be, and appropriate, a home visit might be made.

4) Identify people with resources and the ability to provide transportation to build a corps of volunteers who can transport persons to medical appointments, pick up prescriptions, or provide other reasonable emergency-type services will be invaluable in times like these.

5) Establish a connection with local officials. Pastors or other qualified persons (those with disaster-response or emergency experience) should reach out to their local Office of Emergency Management (OEM) or whatever organization in your town has responsibility for disaster preparedness and response. This is the place where information, needs, and resources are shared. The Church needs to be a part of this group.

6) Establish or renew connections with local officials in your area (mayor, police & fire chiefs, media professionals), to create a common platform for response and involvement.

7) Family-focused considerations

As schools are closed, families are struggling with such things as childcare. Your church may have persons committed to helping fill this gap. Your church can also provide resources for home activities for children and families, the creation of resources for home Vacation Bible Schools, and other creative ideas that will help persons build and maintain the relationships needed due to longer periods of isolation.

Beyond that, please keep in mind those severe situations where families are completely dependent upon free school breakfast and lunch programs to feed their children. Using your church as a "response station" for the distribution of needed meals can be a creative way to collaborate with other entities in your community to be out in front of your care for the world around you, especially our children.

8) Make use of our staff. Contact our [NYAC Missions Office](#) for more information or assistance.

Friends, we are living in uncertain times that each day challenges our ability as leaders to make prudent decisions concerning this pandemic. In difficult days, it is easy for us to be critical of one another and respond out of our fear and anxiety. No matter whether you are clergy or lay, all of us must draw deep within our spiritual selves to lead in ways that convey a non-anxious, hopeful and unflappable presence to our congregants, teams inside our churches and our communities at large.

This is where the rubber meets the road in your leadership. These are days that, quite simply, require leaders to be their best selves in all circumstances. During recent conversations about divisions within the church, this is the time when we must demonstrate our resolve to be unified in our response to the critical needs around us.

Before he left this earthly life, Jesus said to his highly anxious disciples, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." (John 14:28, NRSV).

I leave you with those same words. In these highly uncertain and anxious times, the power and presence of our God will give us renewed hope and conviction to lead with the Spirit of Christ in our work.

Do not let your heart be troubled. Do not be afraid. There is a way through this. We will do it together.

The Journey Continues, . . .

Grace & Peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thomas Bickerton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left.

Thomas Bickerton
Resident Bishop