



March 19, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters;

As elders of a local church, we have been asking ourselves what the good and godly response of our church must be to the growing crisis of COVID-19. This letter is a call to rich community and fellowship that shows God's love to those around us.

Summary:

- We will switch to livestream for our Sunday services, beginning March 22, 2020. We want to actively discourage actual physical attendance. We are asking you join the livestream for as rich a corporate experience as we can create.

- We suggest switching to virtual meetings and community for small groups, Bible Studies, etc. We will not have face-to-face meetings at the church for small groups, Bible studies, or outside groups, except those involving only a few people.

- We are asking you to provide care to those closest to you, and to reach out to include a few others from the church or your community in your caring circle. We ask that you reach out to others in our church and to your neighbors and gather the caring circle together for Sunday worship.

- Beyond the immediate circle of care, we ask that you work hard to continue to stay in touch with others by phone, text and e-mail, and to pass along prayer requests and needs to leaders and elders for wider distribution and response.

Reasoning and Recommendations

- We will actively encourage livestream participation only for our Sunday services, beginning March 22, 2020.

The elders have wrestled with this for several days. We have felt that in light of the continuing increase in cases in the United States, Texas, Harris County and Galveston County, and given the recommendations from the CDC and state and local governments, a proper respect for authority and a proper love for our neighbor compels us to ask the church to meet dispersed in homes rather than gathered in the building.

Key Scriptures that speak to this discussion include Romans 13:1-5, Proverbs 22:3, and Mark 12:31. In particular, the command to love our neighbor compels us to avoid activities that would do harm. The way this virus spreads and grows means that gathering together would have a real potential to increase the number of cases in our community, not to mention adding real risk to our own older or at-risk members.

But as elders we struggled because of the great value of gathered corporate worship and fellowship. Key Scriptures that encourage us to meet include Hebrews 10:25, Mark 12:30 and Acts 5:27-29. In support of this position one of the elders said “Of all people we ought to meet and worship our God corporately... we ought to obey God rather than make decisions based on what might happen. Is not God sovereign?” Yet we concluded that we could continue to be God’s church even when meeting for a time scattered, that this could glorify God and show his love in the community, while not putting our neighbors at risk.

Making Livestreaming Rich and Valuable

We really want to encourage people to continue setting aside the time on Sunday for corporate worship. We hope to have live worship songs each week, though this will depend on the availability of worship team members. Using the YouTube livestream, we will be able to gather prayer requests and praises, have a separate screen for message slides and song lyrics and include other elements to worship.

We won’t be able to pass an offering basket during the livestream, but we do encourage you to continue giving as the Lord allows. You’ll be able to mail your gifts, drop them at the church or give online.

As Easter approaches, we plan to livestream all the regular and special services, including Thursday of Easter Week and Easter Sunrise. Some of these would normally be communion services, and we will be encouraging you to participate in communion where you are. We’ll talk below about creating a circle of people you’re comfortable having little social distance with. We hope communion can be taken by gathering this circle of people.

- We suggest switching to virtual meetings and community for small groups, Bible Studies, etc. We will not have face-to-face meetings at the church for small groups, Bible studies, or outside groups, except those involving only a few people.

Making our Groups Valuable

We would like the many groups that have taken hold in our church during the last few years to continue providing love and support to each other. One way to do this is to use Zoom (my favorite), Facebook Live, or one of the other internet tools to have meetings. You would be surprised what a good experience you can have. The men’s prayer meeting started this on Wednesday (March 18, 2020) and it worked well. If you are a group leader and would like to set up this kind of meeting, let us know and we can help.

If you do want to meet as a group in a home, we recommend that the group size be limited to 10, that good washing and sanitizing be the norm, and that no one who feels they’ve been exposed or is in a high risk age or health situation participate.

- We are asking you to provide care to those closest to you, and to reach out to include a few others from the church or your community in your caring circle so that the church can continue

to be the hands and feet and heart and voice of Jesus. We ask that you reach out to others in our church and to your neighbors and gather the caring circle together for Sunday worship.

Forming Communities for Worship and Caring

By the nature of this disease and the recommended response to it, we are becoming more isolated than we would like and the epidemic of loneliness can easily be amplified by this isolation. But most of us are not entirely alone. We have nuclear and extended family members and others who will care for us if we get sick and who we will care for. Within this circle we have consciously decided that social distancing doesn't apply.

We want to encourage you to reach out to others in your neighborhood and in the church who don't have enough of that kind of support and draw just one or two more people into your caring community. In doing this we are encouraging the gathering of the body in these circles to worship together on Sunday and to care for each other. We can all be the hands and feet and heart and voice of Jesus to a few others in this trying time, even if none of us is sick with this disease.

- Beyond the immediate circle of care, we ask that you work hard to continue to stay in touch with others by phone, text and e-mail, and to pass along prayer requests and needs to leaders and elders for wider distribution.

Use Technology for Godly Purposes

Furthermore, we encourage you to use every means available to stay in touch with (and in prayer for) those you're no longer seeing face-to-face. This could include texts and text groups, phone calls, and e-mails. The small group that Gail and I belong to has a very active text group that is a real blessing.

Moreover, as health concerns, financial needs and shopping needs come to light, we'd like you to pass these along to leaders and elders for prayer and to elicit more help. We can often put together needs with resources, and we do plan to focus our benevolence giving on those who fall into economic hardship. We don't see this as limited to Trinity's members and friends, but as a way of caring in the community.

In the next few days we will be forming a text chain of as many small group and Bible Study leaders as possible, along with the pastors and elders, to pass along updates from the individual groups as they communicate or meet.

This has been a long letter. Thank you for listening and prayerfully supporting these initiatives. We'll be making lots of individual announcements and updates based on this thinking. As elders we are praying that God would richly bless both our church community and our outreach into the larger community in this challenging time.

In Christ,

Bob DeGray, for the elders.

