



March 13, 2020

To the members of our family, our St. Stephen Congregation.

The events of the last week have been unprecedented in each of our lifetimes. Never before has the risk of a potential global pandemic been set before us and as of the writing of this message to you, we are indeed coming face to face with that very reality. When we met this past Wednesday evening, we had every intention of continuing our schedule of events unabated taking the precautions recommended at that time. Much however has changed in the last 48 hours, which now gives me pause to rethink and reorder our efforts and schedules moving forward.

I want to also assure you that my decisions have been informed in consultation with other community leaders who are also trusted friends, including members of clergy from a variety of faith traditions. All of us have had to confront the unique circumstances this situation now presents us with. As you know my first response was to never abandon the church pulpit, our congregation, or even the world at large in the face of an external threat. It ran counter to everything I know and believe about the church and its role and obligations to society-God's world.

Yesterday however, a colleague of mine who is an member of the clergy in the United Methodist Church here in Kentucky shared with me a letter he had received from their conference Bishop offering a "theological position or perspective" that after reading, I felt gave us all room to maneuver in faithfulness should we choose to alter course and suspend services for a period of time until the immediate threat passes. In his letter he refers to *"our ability to minister to the vulnerable in our community by completing our Lenten season fasting from communal worship, in an effort to provide a palliative measure of sacrifice to protect those in our community most at risk from contracting the virus and its potential effects."*

In reading those words I found in myself a way forward, one that was faithful to our theological commitments to God and our commitments to each other and the larger community. Medical experts are now asking us to commit to a program of "Social Distancing" for a period of time to allow our medical community to keep pace with the cases being reported and treatment needed for those as most serious risk; the elderly and those with suppressed immune systems. We must be responsible and join the rest of the community in that effort and hope that by doing so we can pass through this time healthy and return to life as normal in the shortest amount of time possible.

With that in mind and in consultation with our church leadership, the following immediate measures are being undertaken.

1. This Sunday March 15th we will conduct an abbreviated and modified service focused on contemplative prayer and the efforts around the world to contend with, and overcome the Covid-19 Pandemic.
DO NOT FEEL COMPELLED TO ATTEND!
If you are elderly, or if you have a suppressed immune system making you vulnerable to this outbreak, please stay home. For those of you who do attend you can expect us to be taking necessary precautions as outlined by the CDC and WHO to maintain distance and cross contamination.
2. Following this Sunday, ALL SERVICES FOR LENT, INCLUDING WEDNESDAY EVENING DINNERS AND SUNDAY SERVICES WILL BE CANCELLED. We will approach this as a higher level of fasting and sacrifice for our community and the world. I encourage you to spend time in prayer and other forms of contemplative time to consider the current situation and asking God to heal us from this time of disease and loss.
3. At this time (subject to change) we plan to resume services on April 5th for Palm Sunday and Holy week as planned. This is a fluid situation and we will communicate to you directly any changes or modifications to this plan.
4. Staff will be maintaining a presence on a modified schedule both in residence and working remotely. Should you need Pastoral care you may reach me directly at 502-417-0572. Michelle is also available to answer health care related question and offer referrals should you want to discuss questions or concerns.
5. Outside organizations that are currently using our campus are making their own decisions on their schedules and will keep us advised as to any changes.

In conclusion I want to assure you that every reasonable precaution is being taken to safeguard the health of our membership. Much is changing daily and as such we do not know what the road ahead looks like with a clear focus at this time. What I ask of each of you is to remain calm, to remain focused, and most of all to get your information from responsible sources. I happen to prefer the CDC Center for Disease Control and the WHO The World Health Organization. I will also ask you to remain faithful in your presence and Christian witness. The world will see us in our response to this crisis in the model of his son Jesus, as I believe God calls us to be. Together as Gods people we will not fail.

My Blessings upon you and this church!

Faithfully Yours.

Reverend Lee Collins

Pastor – St. Stephen United Church of Christ

Louisville, KY