

March 11, 2020

Dear Burke Presbyterian Church Members and Friends,

As we are sure you are now all aware, the novel coronavirus -- COVID-19-- that originated in China and began infecting people there in December is now circulating in Northern Virginia. Because of the health risks this virus poses—especially severe to those 60 and over and those who have underlying health conditions-- we are taking important steps to help prevent its spread within our church.

Your church leadership and staff are taking this disease threat very seriously. Effective immediately, we are implementing measures to ensure that our church family remains as safe as possible.

BPC will follow all directives we feel are prudent from the federal and state public health agencies and from the Fairfax County Health Department, as well as from the Fairfax County Public Schools for our preschool. In the extraordinary event that we must cancel worship services and other church activities, we will communicate those decisions to you electronically by email and through our church website (www.burkepreschurch.org).

Current prevention measures being implemented at BPC:

1. Frequently wash hands with soap and warm water and/or use hand sanitizer. Try not to touch your eyes, nose or mouth with your hands, except after washing or sanitizing your hands.
2. When attending church or church activities, try not to make skin-to-skin contact (shaking hands, hugging) with anyone, to include interactions with the greeters, ushers, during passing of the peace, and with the pastors after services. Instead of shaking hands or hugging, you are encouraged to nod or bow with your hands together. Note that this is for your benefit. It is also being respectful of others in our congregation who may not welcome physical contact.

3. If you are leading or convening a church gathering, consider the possibility of gathering virtually. BPC now has a Zoom account that can be scheduled just as you would schedule a room in the building. Contact Office Manager Chichi Comsti (office@burkepreschurch.org or 703-764-0456) for information on how to schedule and set up a Zoom gathering.

4. Cough or sneeze into the crook of your arm. Dispose of all used tissues in a refuse container. Use of disposable tissues is preferred. If coughing or sneezing during services, consider removing yourself either to the library (if there are not already others in that room) or to your home. Do not become fearful if someone occasionally coughs or sneezes near you at church; the odds are that is due to allergies or a cold. The ushers may gently ask those who appear to be ill to remove themselves from the Meeting House so they won't endanger others.

5. No one with a respiratory illness (especially those with a cough and shortness of breath) should attend church or other church activities. If you feel like you are coming down with a respiratory illness, stay home. Please do not visit the church until coronavirus has been ruled out by a medical authority or it has been at least 5 days since full recovery. Family members of those who are ill should not attend either, whether ill or not, as they may be incubating and shedding the virus, which could spread to others. Family members should not return to church until at least 14 days have passed since anyone in your household has been ill.

6. If you are over 60 years old, you might consider not attending any church activities. Those age 80 or older AND all those who are medically fragile (e.g., have diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, liver and kidney problems, etc.) should STRONGLY consider not attending any church activities (and also limiting any contact with the general public whenever you can prevent it) due to the severe consequences of coronavirus infection in this group.

7. If you have recently taken a cruise or otherwise recently traveled outside the country, particularly to a place where coronavirus is being transmitted, we recommend that you consider not attending church services or other activities for at least 14 days.

8. When attending church or other church activities, if space is available, we encourage you to spread out across the Meeting House or other rooms, trying to keep 3 feet or more of distance between you and others (it is fine for your family members to sit closely together).

9. View live streaming of the services at home on your computer, phone, or tablet or in the library if you feel that the Meeting House is getting too crowded. We are working on the details for making live streaming available via internet and will circulate the details as soon as the system is in place.

10. Offering collection: We will not be passing the collection plate during the offertory in order to discourage touching of surfaces that others have touched. We are encouraging you to either drop your offering in the collection plates by the door as you leave the Meeting House or give online using the ENGAGE application on the BPC website. Alternatively, you may mail your check to the church office.

11. When we serve communion: We will use cut up pieces of bread large enough to dip in the cup without having one's fingers come into contact with the juice. The bread will be arranged on trays or in baskets such that the pieces can be easily picked up without contacting other pieces of bread. Parents should assist their children and others who may require assistance.

12. Finally, please inform our church office (703-764-0456) if you are ill with a suspected or confirmed case of the coronavirus. If you require any assistance due to this illness or any other illness, please let us know so we can provide you with any needed support.

Friends, we are a people of faith whose hope is in Christ. Trusting in the love and grace of God, we invite you also to pray. Prayer invites us into the heart of God, and prayer transforms our own hearts. Prayer opens us more fully to the needs of others, and to our own needs, as well. Pray for those who are sick, and those caring for the sick. Pray for those without access to health care. Pray for officials making difficult decisions, and for those trying to maintain crucial institutions in the midst of crisis.

Remember how often Jesus said, simply, "do not be afraid." Fear breeds confusion. While this virus is clearly a cause for concern, panic is not helpful. We all need to prepare well and exercise caution, and we will do our best to practice the love we proclaim through whatever the days ahead bring.

Now is an excellent time to practice what my (David's) favorite Presbyterian pastor, Fred Rogers, was fond of saying: "It always helps to have people we love beside us when we have to do difficult things in life." We are all going to be asked to do some things differently in the days ahead, and some of them will be difficult. Even when practicing "social distancing," we are not alone. We have the gift of one another, as well as multiple technological means of closing the distances we're being asked to keep.

So, keep in mind Mr. Rogers' other great invitation and be good neighbors to one another. Reach out to those you know who are at risk. Check in on vulnerable friends and neighbors. If folks are isolating or quarantined, use the tools we have to connect with them.

Above all, remember that we are loved and called to love, and neither life nor death nor coronavirus can separate us from the love of God we know through Jesus Christ.

Grace and peace,

The Rev. Dr. David Ensign (Interim Pastor)
Craig Postlewaite, Clerk of Session