



March 13, 2020

Greetings in the name of Jesus Christ.

COVID-19 has the world's attention and we want to be in touch about the EMC's response. We are not your source of news or information about the virus, but we can speak about matters specific to churches and to our mission as a conference.

As you know, we have missionaries serving where health care is less than in Canada. We have direct responsibility for our EMC administered missionaries and are in regular contact with them, seeking to make the best decisions about what is best for their families. We have not yet decided that any missionaries need to leave, but this could change quickly. The Board of Missions will do what we can to keep our missionaries safe. We had plans for EMC Prayer Teams to Paraguay and Mexico; these are under review. Travel outside of Canada is not recommended for anyone.

Every congregation has questions about what to do in daily church life. Basically, follow what local authorities are directing and maintain a friendly, non-alarmist, and informed message within your congregation. We encourage leadership teams to discuss preparedness, and then approach the congregation with an encouraging, informed message. Here are key issues for the leadership team:<sup>[1]</sup>

1. Identify a point person and form a response team. Church leaders should assign a staff leader or trusted volunteer to lead in gathering information and tracking updates about COVID-19. This person should lead a response team: some of the pastoral team, janitors or maintenance people, a communications person, and a local health care professional. This team's mandate is to seek the best information and make decisions regarding the church's response.
2. Establish clear congregational communication. Post signs and flyers encouraging handwashing and cough/sneeze etiquette at entrances, in hallways, and in restrooms. Put announcements in print bulletins, e-newsletters, and on social media and websites with updates regarding changes in scheduled gatherings.
3. Adjust worship practices and gatherings. Should conditions warrant (for instance, COVID-19 is reported in your local community), make changes to common church practices: Suspend "passing the peace" or greeting with handshakes during worship; consider single-serve communion, rather than common cups; set up an offering drop-off box rather than passing the plate, and minimize food preparation and serving during coffee hours.
4. Your church may need to cancel programming, small-group gatherings, or worship services. Should local health officials or a federal agency warn against public gatherings or advise congregations (or yours specifically) not to meet, follow this advice.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Adapted from Christianity Today's *A Concise Coronavirus Guide for Churches*. See [their website](#) for church-focused guidance.

5. Create a plan for doing a worship service online. This could be a powerful way to communicate about the situation in a shutdown and allow you to provide spiritual care for your congregants. If you do not a livestream, join with a EMC congregation that does. Contact the EMC office to learn which congregations have this option.
6. Workplace practices. Revisit policies on sick leave and absences, including mandatory paid leave in a local outbreak. Church staff and volunteers should be symptom-free before returning to work. Leave should be allowed for those who care for sick family members. In the event of a local outbreak, determine whether flexible work hours are possible for the church office to minimize contact with each other. Consider remote-work arrangements if the information technology and infrastructure can support it.

As the church of Jesus Christ we have a further witness: to not only keep safe and avoid transmission, but be of service to those society wants to avoid. In ages past the church was sometimes the only institution willing to care for the sick during a widespread health emergency. We specialize in caring for the sick as our Saviour modelled.

We have much better health care today than in the past, but can still ask: Who are the people being avoided or blamed? Who in our congregation or community is feeling vulnerable now? These may be the bereaved, those living alone, and elderly people without children nearby. Because this virus originated in China, Asian people may especially need the church's love and acceptance. Are there ways the church can deliver meals to the quarantined, visit by phone with the sick, or provide communication in the community?

Please contact with the EMC office with specific questions or if you face a situation that you don't know how to handle. We want to direct you to the best possible information.

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