



WISCONSIN COUNCIL
OF CHURCHES
COURAGE. JUSTICE. HOLY IMAGINATION.

April 9, 2020
Maundy Thursday

On Ministry Choices and the Commandment to Love

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

– John 13: 34-35

Dear Colleagues in Ministry,

We write on this day when many of us observe Jesus' last gathering with his disciples prior to his betrayal and arrest, an occasion which he used to offer a new commandment: to love one another, just as he has loved us.

In this season of pandemic, we are learning new ways to demonstrate love. Right now, love means washing our hands thoroughly, wearing a face mask, staying apart, and staying home. It means sacrificing some of our beloved traditions so that others might live.

We are now nearly a month into Wisconsin's declared public health emergency. By Easter Sunday, most churches in our state will have been worshiping in alternative ways for four weeks: viewing recordings, live streams, following online links, dialing in to conference calls, and reading materials sent through the postal service. For the sake of love, these practices will need to continue for some time to come.

Wisconsin Council of Churches staff have taken many questions from clergy across the state about what is permissible under the various emergency declarations, federal and state, including the Governor's "Safer at Home" order. As we advise church leaders, we caution safety as they discern: what is the ministry practice which allows you to best protect the life and health of those you shepherd, and the wider community as well? At this time, what is the ministry practice which is the lowest touch, offers the least physical interaction, and does the least to encourage people to leave their homes for unnecessary reasons? In each case, that is the ministry practice we recommend.

As we take the command of love into our hearts this Maundy Thursday, we urge you to ponder more deeply what it means for Christians to follow the law.

We write this letter to urge you to consider that we are not necessarily called to push our practices to the limits of what is allowable under the law. Instead, we believe that we are called to model practices by which our neighbor is protected, and our parishioners kept safe. At times, those practices are more cautious than those deemed permissible by public officials.

We trust that you have been consulting your ecclesial authorities for wisdom and practical guidance in accordance with your tradition. Following this letter are the ways in which the Council has been advising clergy when they contact us on important matters of worship recording locations, pastoral care, gatherings, and outdoor/drive-in services. We pray that these notes may assist you in making decisions for your congregation, region, or other faith-based group that are rooted in Christian love.

Peace and blessings,

Your colleagues at
the Wisconsin Council of Churches



WISCONSIN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR CHRISTIAN LEADERS DURING COVID-19
As of April 9, 2020

AT THIS TIME, WE RECOMMEND

- **We RECOMMEND recording worship from home** and streaming or premiering it on your preferred platform at worship time. If you wish to have multiple leaders, and need technical assistance, please be in touch with Council staff.
- **We RECOMMEND making pastoral care visits remotely** by video, telephone, text or instant message.
- **We RECOMMEND making all funeral preparations by remote means.** See 'A Guide to Christian Funerals during COVID-19 for detailed information about how to work with families.'¹
- **We RECOMMEND asking all community service volunteers from high risk groups to stay home.** Ask all other volunteers (i.e. your members helping with food bank, meal or grocery delivery, and meals-to-go) to wear masks and wash thoroughly.

AT THIS TIME, WE ADVISE AGAINST

- **We advise AGAINST recording worship at church, even with just one or two people or a small team.** There is still risk of disease transmission, and you run the risk of sharing exposures between households. The risk is even higher for those who are singing. We have received feedback that many people prefer the casual, personal feel of their pastor's presence from the home than the echoes of an empty sanctuary.
- **We advise AGAINST making face-to-face pastoral visits, even with a mask.** If you believe the matter is essential to mental/spiritual health and you cannot help them remotely, consider speaking through a glass door or closed window.
- **We advise AGAINST holding small group gatherings or mini-worship groups at the church.** If you have overlapping groups of people attend (for instance, worship or group leaders), you create a higher risk of transmission. Viruses don't respect the distinction between whether someone is a leader and someone is a participant. You are also creating an environment where there can be transmission in shared spaces such as bathrooms and entries, via surfaces unsanitized between groups.
- **We advise AGAINST home drop-off or pick-up of non-essential items.** While well-intentioned, goodie bags, prayer rocks, communion kits, and other items can be a risky proposition. Keep drop-offs to safely distanced groceries or meals for at-risk folks, and mail or email activity sheets instead.
- **We advise AGAINST holding outdoor or drive-in services.** You are encouraging people to leave home for a non-essential purpose. If someone needs to use the restroom, or folks opt to open car windows, or approach one another to chat, you have created an environment where it will be very easy for people to be exposed and to violate the safe practices. We know that many people are longing for their church hugs, but we would all grieve if our gatherings were the beginning of a new wave of illness.

¹ See "Guide for Christian Funerals During COVID-19" available at wichurches.org