

How to Love Your Neighbor During a Pandemic

All of us continue to struggle with appropriate responses to the presence of COVID-19, a situation that is taking us into uncharted territory as a church. I am not certain how long this virus will remain virulent among us, but I am certain that as Christians, the second Great Commandment should undergird the responses we make: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” In this challenging time, we should find ways to love rather than fear, share rather than hoard.

We will take actions that show our concern for others, by both responding to their needs and preventing ourselves from accidentally infecting others. Here are some steps you can take:

- Practice social distancing by staying away from others as much as possible.
- Even when you cannot be present in person, keep in contact with others. People who are isolated physically still need to make connections. Call, text, or email others.
- Don't wait to see if someone needs your assistance. If you suspect that someone needs things such as food or supplies, determine what you can do to meet those needs.
- Continue to be the church even if we are not physically present with one another each week. For example, join an online church service, and find a way that your Bible study or Sunday School class can take place virtually.
- Continue your local outreach ministries that help vulnerable people—but in ways that limit the possible spread of the virus. This office will be compiling and sending out lists of suggestions for outreach efforts that congregations report to us.

At the diocesan office, I feel that it is better to err on the side of caution rather than look back much later and wish that I had done more in the spring of 2020. **The next three weeks may be critical in fighting the spread of the virus.** Here are some

concrete steps that those of us in the diocesan office are taking in order to decrease the possibility that we infect others:

- The ordination of deacons scheduled for March 21 will be postponed until a later date.
- I will not make congregational visits on March 22 and 29, as had been scheduled. Instead, I hope to participate in virtual worship services in Little Rock-area congregations.
- The diocesan office will conduct all upcoming meetings digitally rather than in person. Thus, Executive Council on March 24 will meet via Zoom.
- The six of us diocesan office employees will often be working from home. Thus, the best way to reach us will be via email.
- **In anticipation of the distinct possibility that Easter Day church services will need to be celebrated virtually rather than in person**, I am working with the cathedral to ensure that its Easter Day Eucharist will be available online for those people who will not be able to digitally access their own local Easter Day celebration.
- The following Diocese of Arkansas events have been cancelled: the March 22–25 Spring Break Camp and the April 3–5 Men’s Retreat, both at Camp Mitchell; and the May 1–3 youth Happening at St. Margaret’s in Little Rock.
- I have instructed the executive director at Camp Mitchell to follow the latest Centers for Disease Control guidelines.

Your congregation needs to take the following specific actions:

- Continue to worship virtually through April 7, no matter how small or large your congregation, and make decisions now about how your congregation will meet the challenge should you not be able to meet in person on Easter Day. (If you need help in being able to share worship online with your parishioners, notify [Jason Alexander](#) or [James Matthews](#), and they can advise you on what to do.) I will make a decision by April 7 regarding responsible practices for worship on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Day, and later.
- Have all your business meetings and classes via teleconference or online instead of in person.
- Determine how people can continue to make offerings and pledge payments online. Contact the diocesan office for advice on how to do so if you are not familiar with online giving.

- Should someone die, have a funeral that involves only family members. Defer a more public memorial service until a later date.
- Find a way to make connections via telephone, email, or text among the clergy, pastoral care givers, and parishioners.
- Work pastorally with people who are planning weddings in the spring and summer, knowing the possibility that weddings might have to be postponed.
- Be ready to defer the Confirmation of people in your congregation if restrictions on worship services continue beyond April 7.
- If you have employees who would be without income given these restrictions on gathering, determine how you can best support them financially and emotionally.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Larry Benfield". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a small cross-like mark at the beginning.

Larry Benfield
Bishop of Arkansas