Dear Church:

I remember one experience during my childhood when I was happily preparing for another day of school. Picking up my books and heading for the door, I faintly heard my mother mention to my father that the school nurse was coming that day. I thought to myself, "this can't be good." I searched the catalog of my mind and remembered the last time the woman with the white dress and hat came to our school; she brought needles with her. Oh, no!

What was I to do? FEAR gripped my heart! I thought to myself, "do I fake sickness or just run away?" At that moment as my imagination was in full bloom and I was beginning to panic, my mother moved next to me and placed her hand on my shoulder. I immediately began to calm down. My mother always had an incredibly calming effect on me. She explained with reassurance in her voice why the vaccination was necessary and the protection for my health it would provide. I wasn't happy about receiving a needle, but I wanted to be brave, and my mother's assurance helped me.

Please receive this communication as my hand upon your shoulder to offer each of you a prayerful presence and information to help calm fear and anxiety as we seek to understand and put into place best practices concerning the Coronavirus.

A Faithful Approach

We sometimes focus on the numbers and the maps, yet we are reminded that each reported case of the virus has behind it a person, a family, a community. We are connected globally, and our compassion and care reach out to the full human community. The church is called to be in prayer for those affected, those caring for the affected, for those valiantly trying to diagnose and treat patients, and for the development of strong partnerships across international communities in order to effectively prevent, detect and respond to this virus. As members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), we offer our prayers for healing and support for all affected.

We offer continued thanks for the medical professionals, concerned citizens, and governmental and non-governmental entities across the world that are actively advocating for an effective and appropriate response.

It is important during such a dynamic global event, that we, as the church, also take the time for an informed and thoughtful response. The need for urgency can be fertile ground for fearful reactions. As we try to go about our daily routines, we may even begin to see others through a lens of skepticism, judgement, and fear. In global health crises such as this, we must be attentive not to place blame on particular individuals or communities. We know too well in the histories of the U.S. and global communities how discrimination and isolation develops towards others or those deemed as “other” (e.g. immigrants, the economically poor, targets of religious prejudice, and religious minorities, to name only a few). We encourage faithful response that is informed by medical and mental health professionals and reflective of our theological identities that we care for all.

Faithful Planning

One antidote to fear can be information and planning. We encourage the sharing of guidelines for preventing
the spread of the virus. Please share prevention strategies with your congregations and communities. While it is tempting to rely on social media outlets for the most up to date information, please be aware of the amount of misinformation that is also shared through these same outlets. In other words, do the research with accredited professional organizations as listed in the resources section below.

For example, consider how you might retain the sanctity of breaking bread while being mindful of staying safe: do you use sanitizer before breaking the bread? Do you break the bread beforehand using gloves while keeping one piece to break during the ritual around the Table? Do you avoid traditional intinction or modify this practice? What other measures would you share? How do you greet each other? What other ways do you use to disinfect common areas? Are there best practices we might share with each other in the region? These are a few of the questions to discuss together in your churches.

Once you are well prepared with information about preventative measures, make a response plan for your congregation or organization. One starting point is to gather leadership and craft a plan that works for your community. It is important that you assess the risks with all available information, make thoughtful proactive decisions, and communicate those decisions as widely as possible. Some elements that go into a response plan may include:

- **Assessment:** For example, consider how you manage regular tasks such as serving communion, nursery care, and other congregational life events and make determinations on what to change based on recommendations from the Center for Disease Control (CDC). https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/specific-groups/guidance-business-response.html

- **Decision Making:** Clarify within the community which individuals will make the decisions about the preventive measures to be used in worship, at events, and in the broad life of the church. Is this the pastor? The pastor and elders? The Board of Trustees? Be clear about that line of decision making and communicate to the broader congregation this decision chain.

- **Communication:** Create clear and comprehensive communication strategy related to sharing decisions made. The CDC and local emergency management offices offer frequent updates. Do be mindful of sharing with those who maybe the most vulnerable in your congregation or faith community. For instance, if you decide to cancel a meeting, determine who communicates the decision including the rationale and the subsequent next steps. Designate a point person(s) to receive the questions that come through phone calls, emails, or even in person. Ensure that all community members know who to contact when questions and inquiries arise.

- **Pastoral Care:** Create a plan to provide care and support for those affected in your setting. How will pastoral care be offered? How will relevant and appropriate information be shared about those affected? When communicating with community members, be mindful of healthcare privacy laws (i.e. HIPAA). When adding individuals to prayer lists be attentive that specificity can cause fear and unnecessary worry.


- **Crisis Management Plan:** There are multiple resources for crisis management plans. We encourage leaders to do appropriate research, contact your regional office, and make plans before a crisis emerges. Read more about planning here in "Words to the Wise." https://disciples.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2009CrisisCommunications.pdf

**Faithful Responses for Church Leaders**
- **Create spaces for storytelling and person-to-person sharing:** There are other ways church leaders can play a role in calming fears and guiding the community towards responses that embody care and compassion. One way to do this is to help people see the stories behind the numbers. In the reference section below, an article from Emory University illustrates how to share the stories of those affected. We can listen within our own communities for stories that remind the church that we are first a community of compassion and care and that fear can undermine our ability to be that kind of community. What are the connections in your own community to those who are affected? How might we create spaces where people share their own and their family’s stories? https://news.emory.edu/features/2020/02/coronavirus-community/
• **Be mindful of prejudices that can surface during moments of fear:** Let us be mindful of the racial and potentially racist overtones and attitudes that can be present in public accounts of the Coronavirus. As the Coronavirus expands across multiple countries and parts of the world, we know that communities are in need of our solidarity and support in these times of being vulnerable. Let our faithful response be centered in compassion and care rather than fear, isolation, or division.

• **Educate and calm fears:** Faith leaders can help educate and calm fears, providing information about risk assessment and best prevention practices. This can happen in worship, newsletters, public bulletin boards, and educational settings. Seek the wisdom of parish nurses and medical professionals within your congregation and community as their professional training provides an informed understanding that can be shared.

• **Create spaces for prayer:** Use pastoral prayers, prayer meetings and other opportunities to encourage prayer for those suffering, those responding, and those seeking to mitigate the harm caused by the Coronavirus.

The Christian Church in North Carolina shares this faithful statement in collaboration with the Office of General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Week of Compassion, and the National Benevolent Association.

**National Benevolent Association**
Serving as the health and social services general ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the National Benevolent Association partners with congregations, regions, general ministries, and a variety of Disciples-related health and social service providers to create communities of compassion and care. nbadacares.org

**Week of Compassion**
Week of Compassion is the relief, refugee, and development mission fund of our Church. It is a ministry of the whole Church, reaching those in need “around the world, around the year.” Any time we respond to a need in the world, we bear witness to the unity of our table, faithfully sharing the gifts that we have as an expression of Christ’s love. In working together with partners, we represent the Disciples of Christ commitment to unity, making our resources reach farther and growing our impact on a global scale. weekofcompassion.org

**Office of General Minister and President (OGMP)**
The OGMP provides leadership for the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada. While encompassing many responsibilities within the Church, the OGMP’s focus is on providing support for the General Minister and President in her duties as the pastor and chief executive officer.

https://disciples.org/general-ministries/disciples-ministries-respond-to-corona-virus/

**North Carolina Disaster Response Team:** DisasterResponseCCNC@gmail.com
The NC Disaster Response Team coordinates and oversees the recovery ministry of the Christian Church in NC.

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With Your Safety and Health in Mind,
+Valerie Melvin, Regional Minister
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