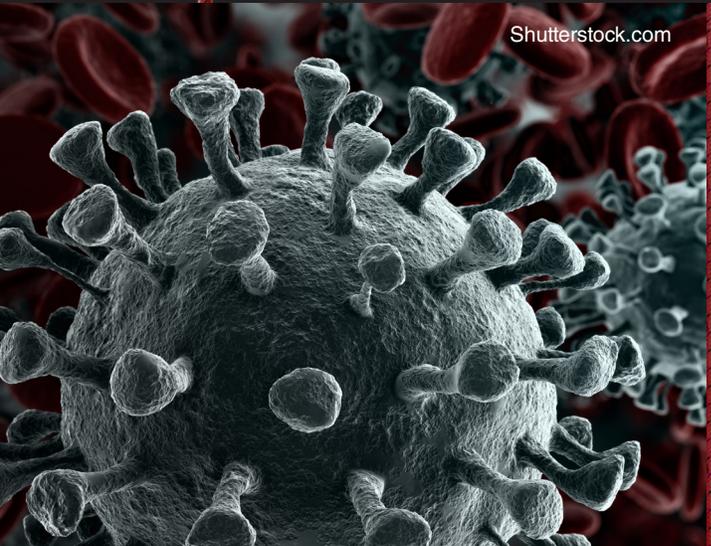




Faithlink

Connecting Faith and Life

Coronavirus by Jeanne Torrence Finley



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The outbreak of a new coronavirus that began in China in December is now spreading around the world. What are the symptoms of this virus, and what effect is it having globally? How can churches and people of faith prepare for this outbreak and help those who are suffering from it in their communities and beyond? ?

What Is a Coronavirus?

The outbreak of a new coronavirus began in China in December and has now spread around the world. While often being referred to as “the coronavirus” in media reports, coronaviruses are actually a large family of viruses that can affect animals or humans and they are named for their crown-like appearance when viewed under a microscope. In humans, several coronaviruses cause respiratory infections such as the common cold, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), as described by the World Health Organization (WHO). The most recently discovered coronavirus—the one making headlines worldwide—is called COVID-19.

Since this is a newly discovered disease, there’s still much to be learned about it. However, we do know that COVID-19 can spread from person to person through respiratory droplets contained in sneezes, coughs, or exhalations from an infected person. People can catch COVID-19 when they touch objects or hard surfaces where these droplets have landed and then touch their eyes, nose, or mouth. People can also catch COVID-19 if they breathe in droplets from an infected person who has coughed, sneezed, or exhaled. Although it’s thought that people are most contagious when they have symptoms, it’s possible that infected people who have mild cases or those who are asymptomatic can also spread the disease. As a result, the virus seems to spread relatively easily from person to person.

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The most common symptoms of COVID-19 are fever, cough, and shortness of breath. Confirmed cases of COVID-19 show symptoms that range from mild to severe to fatal. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) believes that symptoms may occur as early as two days after exposure or as late as 14 days after someone's initial exposure. WHO says that most people recover from the virus with more serious cases requiring special treatment. However, others become seriously ill and have difficulty breathing. Older individuals and people with serious underlying chronic health problems are most vulnerable to becoming seriously ill.

REFLECT:

- What else have you read about the spread of this virus? What did you learn today that you hadn't heard previously? How has this information helped you to understand this situation better?
- As you've been reading about the coronavirus in the media, what misinformation have you run across? Why is misinformation a problem in these situations?

Spread and Protective Measures

According to a situation report from the WHO on the morning of March 8, more than 100,000 cases have been confirmed globally, and over 100 countries have reported laboratory-confirmed cases of COVID-19. Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organization, says that WHO has "increased our assessment of the risk of spread and the risk of impact of COVID-19 to very high at a global level." He continues,

What we see at the moment are linked epidemics of COVID-19 in several countries, but most cases can still be traced to known contacts or clusters of cases. We do not see evidence as yet that the virus is spreading freely in communities. As long as that's the case, we still have a chance of containing this virus, if robust action is taken to detect cases early, isolate, and care for patients and trace contacts.

The CDC says that the best way to prevent COVID-19 is to avoid exposure and recommends the following preventative actions:

- Avoid close contact with infected people.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Stay home if you're sick.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces using a regular household cleaning spray or wipe.
- Use a face mask only if you have symptoms to avoid contaminating others who aren't sick.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after going to the bathroom; before eating; and after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.
- If soap and water aren't readily available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60 percent alcohol.

REFLECT:

- Do you find statistical information helpful in your dealing with the spread of COVID-19? Why or why not?
- How does it change your understanding of COVID-19 to know that it's a disease that's affecting the whole globe?
- Which of these preventative measures would be most challenging for you to carry out? What might you do to make them easier?

Congregational Preparedness

Since the CDC is urging the public to prepare for a possible COVID-19 outbreak, it's important for churches to engage in emergency preparedness, including planning and resource assessment.

Congregations can encourage people to get information from a reliable source such as the CDC or the WHO. The CDC has been urging people

to “share facts, not fear” in order to help stop the spread of rumors. For example, Asian Americans have felt increased public scrutiny, and in some areas their businesses have suffered because of fear related to COVID-19. Congregations can help stop that fear by communicating the fact that neither race nor ethnicity increases the chance of getting or spreading COVID-19.

Bishop Grant J. Hagiya, of the California-Pacific Conference, issued this statement in February:

We have all been consumed by the rapid spread of the Coronavirus and its growing implications for our daily lives. We cannot downplay the importance of being prepared and not reacting with panic or fear.

As a spiritual body, we need to remember that fear turns people toward sin. Anytime we scapegoat a certain people (e.g., Asians where the virus seemed to originate), we are guilty of practicing such sin. Our response to victims should not be ostracizing and shunning them,

but it should be to have compassion and care for them.

Pastor Brad Bartelmay of Holland First UMC in Michigan says that his church is already planning: “We are calmly preparing for any possibility. . . . We are strategizing on how to ‘do church’ in a world where worship attendance is depressed, and where small groups and Sunday School may be discontinued. We will be exploring more pastoral caregiving and wellness tracking of vulnerable populations.”

REFLECT:

- How can your congregation help to dispel disinformation and racial biases connected to this situation?
- What is your congregation doing to prepare for a possible outbreak? What suggestions would you share with your church leaders at this time?
- What spiritual disciplines will help your congregation stay calm during this time of uncertainty?

Core Bible Passages

In her January *Christianity Today* website article titled, “Is It Faithful to Flee an Epidemic? What Martin Luther Teaches Us About Coronavirus,” medical student Emmy Yang recalls an open letter by the Protestant reformer from the time when the black plague struck Wittenberg. In his letter, Luther addressed the Christian response to people who suffered from this disease and challenged Christians to see care of the sick as care of Christ himself (**Matthew 25:41-46**). However, Luther didn’t encourage recklessness in doing so.

Yang writes that Luther’s letter “straddles two competing goods: honoring the sanctity of one’s own life, and honoring the sanctity of those in need.” Defending public health measures such as quarantines, Luther said that God trusts that we will take care our bodies.

She concludes,

In a climate of fear . . . I come back to Luther’s letter for guidance. As a medical student and a future physician, I have a clear vocational commitment to caring for the sick Precautions I will take, yes. But I am reminded by Luther that they are individuals deserving of care all the same. “When did we see you sick?” ask the righteous in the parable of the sheep and the goats, to which Jesus responds, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (**Matthew 25:39-40**). If and when the coronavirus encroaches upon our communities, how will we faithfully respond?

REFLECT:

- What does this passage say to you about ministry in the time of COVID-19?
- How would you interpret Luther’s “two competing goods”?

Our Interconnected World

The coronavirus is causing many people to question our globally connected economy, and a number of op-eds and financial columns have been giving expression to these public fears. Steven Erlanger, writing in the *New York Times*, notes that the spread of the coronavirus “may be a decisive moment in the fervid debates over how much the world integrates or separates.” Before the outbreak reached Europe, many around the world had begun to express concern about security, trade practices, industrial supply chains, and share their doubts about doing business with China. Erlanger writes, “The virus already has dealt another blow to slowing economies, and emboldened populists to revive calls, tinged with racism and xenophobia, for tougher controls over migrants, tourists, and even multinational corporations.”

Generally, the term *globalization* leads us to think of trade, global markets, and ease of travel and communication. The coronavirus may well expand our notions of the way people worldwide are both interconnected and interdependent. It may also force us to think more about how nations can help one another maintain the health of all people and the relative fragility of all life on this planet.

One of the basic tenets of the Christian faith is that God created the earth. The earth belongs to God, not to humankind, but people are also made in the image of God. All of these affirmations speak of our interconnectedness. In this time of uncertainty and fear, how will we act in ways that recognize our interdependency and work together for the health of the world and its people?

REFLECT:

- How is the coronavirus affecting your view of globalization in its largest sense?
- How would you answer the last question in this essay?

UMCOR Response to COVID-19

In keeping with its policy of working with partners on the ground in an emergency situation, the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) issued an emergency grant in early February to Amity Foundation in Nanjing, China, to aid in limiting the spread of COVID-19. Amity Foundation has been a partner of the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) and UMCOR for many years in both disaster response and development work, and the grant has been helping enable infection, prevention, and control measures in affected areas.

“Since the outbreak of 2019nCoV, the Amity Foundation has been responding actively to the epidemic by purchasing needed materials for medical staff at the frontline,” She Hongyu, associate general secretary of Amity Foundation, wrote in an email to UMCOR International Disaster Response leadership. “Relief materials have been sent to a number of hospitals in Hubei Province supporting medical staff battling against the virus.” Hongyu said that Amity staff are purchasing and delivering medical supplies to protect medical staff in Hubei Province.

Laurie W. Felder, director of UMCOR International Disaster Response, said that UMCOR is “pleased to provide much-needed assistance to the people of China who are battling this growing epidemic.” Thomas Kemper, general secretary of the UM GBGM, added that the agency “has been a friend of the Christian community in China for many years” and promised to “do our part . . . to help our brothers and sisters deal with this situation which has already claimed hundreds of lives.”

REFLECT:

- Why do you think UMCOR works through partners in local communities to help alleviate suffering instead of leading their own worldwide efforts?
- How can your church get involved and support the work of UMCOR and other communities affected by COVID-19?

Helpful Links

- Find up-to-date information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>
- The World Health Organization is a trusted source for up-to-date information about the COVID-19 outbreak: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>
- The UMC has posted “Coronavirus: What To Know, How To Help”:
<https://www.umc.org/en/content/coronavirus-what-to-know-how-to-help>
- The United Church of Canada has provided an “Emergency Plan” for churches to help them minimize the impact of a disaster, including reducing the potential spread of disease:
<https://www.united-church.ca/leadership/church-administration/emergency-planning>

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Also This Week in 

Farming in America

by Benjamin J. Dueholm

The concept of the family farm has long been seen as the bedrock of American life. How has farming changed over the years? How have we as a culture adapted to the transformation in agriculture? How does our faith challenge us to respond to these changes?

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Opening Prayer

O God of compassion, we ask your presence in our midst as we learn from one another about the coronavirus that is spreading around the world. Inspire us to eagerly learn what we need to know and to willingly be messengers of your love in these trying times; in Christ's name. Amen.

Leader Helps

- Have several Bibles on hand and a markerboard and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions.
- Open the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.
- Begin the session by talking about the updated situation regarding the coronavirus COVID-19. Breaking news has been coming out rapidly, and situations may have changed quite drastically since this issue was first written.
- Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to honor these differences by treating one another with respect as you explore this topic together.
- As an opening activity, ask the following questions for discussion:
 - What concerns do you have about the coronavirus?
 - What sources of information have you found beneficial?
 - How prepared do you think your church and community are to deal with the possibility of a local outbreak?
- Read or review highlights of each section of this issue. Use the *REFLECT* questions to stimulate discussion.
- As a closing activity, ask the following questions for discussion:
 - What are your next steps in preparation for a possibility of a local outbreak?
 - What do you think your church might do to prepare?
- Close the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.

Teaching Alternatives

Show participants the comic “Just for Kids: A Comic Exploring the New Coronavirus.” You will be able to preview this comic and download it at the following link where you will also be able to read an NPR story about the comic: <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/02/28/809580453/just-for-kids-a-comic-exploring-the-new-coronavirus>

Ask: How might this resource help you in talking about the coronavirus with the children in your life? Where could you share this comic and link?

Closing Prayer

O God, help us to be calm in this time of fear and uncertainty. Give us wisdom and courage to walk down paths we've never traveled before as we seek to be people of compassion and love. Amen.