

Dear Church family,

I have some important **information to share with you about worship services on this Sunday, March 15th**. Please keep reading! This information is a shift from what I sent out to you yesterday.

You know there's an old saying - *What a difference a day makes*. Well, that is certainly the case these days. The circumstances around **the Coronavirus epidemic** have moved so rapidly that it is a little hard to keep up! I sent you my Thursday Thoughts email yesterday letting you know that we would still be holding our regular worship services this coming Sunday, March 15th. At the time I wrote that letter (on Wednesday afternoon, actually), it seemed like the right course of action to take. Over the past 24 hours, quite a bit has changed.

Here is **our public health situation** as far as I understand it. Because of the minimal amount of testing that has been done to see who actually carries the Coronavirus in the U.S., it is impossible for us to know the number of people who have been infected. It is true, apparently, that relatively young and healthy people will not be in great danger from the virus as it currently presents. That is not the case, however, for elderly people, or people with weakened or compromised immune systems. And what our public health officials are particularly concerned about is spreading the virus to our more vulnerable folks rapidly in a way that might end up overwhelming our hospital systems (and hence our ability to care for those who need it most). This has led to increasing calls by [officials at the state level](#), as well as federal organizations like [the Centers for Disease Control](#), to ask people not to congregate in large gatherings over the next few days to try and slow down how rapidly the virus is spreading.

Just yesterday, Bishop Gary Mueller of the Arkansas Conference of the United Methodist Church [issued a pastoral letter](#) expressing his concern for all the churches under his care. In that letter, he asked us to consider whether we should be meeting right now in worship given the chance that we can spread the Coronavirus more rapidly in large groups. I have also learned that most (if not all) large churches in NW Arkansas are suspending Sunday worship services for this coming Sunday.

All of the above has led me to the conviction that we need to avoid meeting together in person for worship this Sunday, March 15th. I want you to know how hard a decision this is for me. I have tried to avoid the possibility of us suspending our in-person gathering time for worship in every way I could think, but this is an instance where I think we have to admit that discretion is the better part of valor. I want to protect anyone in our congregation whose immune system is compromised for whatever reason_ and I would never forgive myself if I thought our act of simply being together in worship had endangered members of our flock. I have spoken with pastors from Jonesboro, Hot Springs Village, Fayetteville, Springdale, and Rogers to get a sense of what others are doing. The collective wisdom I have gleaned from that is all pointing to

the fact that suspending in-person worship is the right thing to do in this unusual and really unprecedented circumstance.

We will still have worship this Sunday--I want you to hear that loud and clear! I am just asking you to go to [the First Church livestream channel on Youtube](#) and worship from your own kitchen or living room at 8:30 am. I am asking our pastors, worship team, and A/V team to come to church and have a worship service during our regular 8:30 am First Praise worship time. We will be together in spirit if not in body, as the Apostle Paul tells us (Colossians 2:5). And if you would rather worship at 9:45 am or 11:00 am, you can access the Sunday morning worship service and follow along with it at a time that is helpful for you.

With all of this in mind, here are a few updated points to note related to how we are adapting to the Coronavirus outbreak:

- Sunday morning worship on March 15th will take place online at 8:30 am via livestream (for both our Downtown and Agape Fellowship campuses).
- Sunday evening activities (incl. children's and youth ministries) will be suspended for March 15th.
- Tithes and offerings can be given using the "online giving" tab [at our church website](#), or they can be brought by the church office during regular business hours.
- Church office will remain open during regularly scheduled hours with no interruptions.
- Children's World, Creative School, and First Kids daycare/preschool program will remain open so long as the Springdale School District remains open. (We will only suspend our daycare/preschool program if/when the public schools in Springdale are suspended.)
- Grow First program on Wednesday, March 18th, will not meet for at least this next week.
- Weekly updates for both Sunday morning worship and Wednesday evening activities will take place via congregational email from the senior pastor. That is, we will be on a week-by-week basis for whether or not we will be holding our large group gatherings.
- Small groups that meet in people's homes are welcome to continue meeting according to their own discretion and planning.

I heard a phrase just today that I think says a lot about where we are right now: **we need to be faithful, not fearful!** And I believe that taking these steps right now is the faithful thing to do. It is not driven by fear, but rather by a desire to love and protect the most vulnerable amongst us. This, too, shall pass. I actually think it will probably pass fairly quickly. But until it does, we need to take sensible steps that have our whole society in mind in terms of containing the spread of this new virus.

Think about the words of Joshua 1:9, which tell us, **“This is my command—be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”** That is God’s word for us right now! He wants us to be strong and full of courage, and we can do that because he will be with us wherever we go. Do not be afraid. Jesus is on our side.

I'll be in touch frequently to let you know where things stand. Please call or email me if you have questions or concerns. God bless you and your families--

See you on Sunday (via livestream) ~

Yours sincerely,

Rev. Andrew C. Thompson
Senior Pastor