

BLACK COALITION AGAINST COVID-19

10 TIPS FOR PROVIDING PASTORAL CARE TO CONGREGANTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The coronavirus pandemic continues to have a serious impact throughout the country, particularly on African American communities. Most jurisdictions, including the District of Columbia, have instituted social distancing measures to prevent the spread of the virus. While necessary, these guidelines need not make us “spiritually distant” from one another. There are many ways, in addition to virtual worship services and bible study, to remain connected with congregants and to provide pastoral care at such a critical time as this.

A few tips include:

1. Make sure that you have a wide variety of media to reach members of your congregation, ranging from teleconference capacity, to social media outlets (including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram), as well as the postal service. Depending on the age and circumstances of your membership, different groups of members will require a different approach for communication. Consider purchasing a robocall and text message system to send out weekly inspirational messages to the congregation via phone calls and text messaging. Be careful to select a company that does not share your congregants’ contact information with others.
2. Send out a pastoral letter expressing your concern for members during this period and offer specific passages of scripture for reflection. Share other resources that may be helpful during this time (i.e. prayer calls, pastoral calls, mental health hotline numbers, sources of food, etc.)
3. Support older persons with pastoral calls and link them to resources that are available through the DC Office on Aging and Community Living. Some of these members may be best reached through regular mail. Have young adults, who are able and can safely practice social distancing, run errands for housebound members. Picking up prescription medicines and delivering groceries can help the most vulnerable to stay at home.
4. Engage lay leaders in dividing up the list of congregants and making regular ‘wellness calls’ to every member of the congregation. Engage the young people in your congregation by pairing them with a more senior member. Keep connected to the youth online and involve them in an advocacy and/or mission project like making masks, raising funds for the food pantry, etc.
5. Set up weekly prayer calls that can be accessed online and by phone. Form an online parents support and prayer group to provide pastoral care to parents who are facing stress and challenges related to home schooling, working remotely, or unemployment.

6. Create a protocol, in concert with preexisting guidelines established by funeral homes, for how the church will handle deaths and funerals during the period of social distancing and share this with the congregation so everyone is assured of how their needs will be addressed during their time of loss. Conduct online memorial services to allow families to grieve. Use platforms such as Zoom, Facebook Live, etc., but be sure that you select a platform that hackers cannot hack into during the memorial service. Most social media platforms can be password protected, to ensure that only the family members and loved ones can attend an online memorial service. When social distancing measures are lifted, plan a service to memorialize all of the people who have been lost to the pandemic, providing an opportunity for congregants to grieve and celebrate the lives of their loved ones, especially if they were unable to attend their funeral.
7. Conduct an online series with congregants that addresses how to cope with anxiety and fear during the coronavirus pandemic. Tap into resources within the congregation and DC community (i.e. mental health professionals, physicians) to co-lead these talks. Ensure that the talks are accessible via phone as well. Engage the ministry team in conducting grief support calls and sending cards to comfort congregants who have lost a loved one.
8. Encourage members of your congregation to attend to their regular medical needs. Hypertension, diabetes, kidney disease, heart disease, and various auto-immune disorders are overwhelmingly present within the African American community. Encourage people to keep their regularly scheduled doctor's appointments and to take their prescribed medications.
9. Post health tips and positive messages for the congregation on your webpage or church newsletter, such as:
 - Do not panic or fear. Stay calm.
 - Do not downplay the seriousness of this outbreak.
 - Stay home, if you can.
 - Wear masks that cover your nose and mouth.
 - Wash your hands regularly and properly.
 - Do not put fingers in your eyes, nose, or mouth to prevent infection.
 - Only share accurate information obtained from trusted sources.
 - Check on isolated church members and neighbors, especially those over 60 and/or with underlying medical conditions.
 - Pray and spend time in conversation with God.
10. During this time of unprecedented disruption and anxiety, pastors and church leaders must attend to their own spiritual nurture and self-care. Rest, sleep, exercise, eat healthy foods, take your medications, journal, dance, and of course pray.

This document was developed by Washington, DC clergy participating in the Faith Community Module convened by the Black Coalition Against COVID-19.