

A Conversation with Dr Rachel Levine, Secretary of Health for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

www.health.pa.gov

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Introduction:

Today Dr. Levine hosted a conference call for clergy regarding the current coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, including an update on measures being taken to stem the spread of the virus and ways in which faith organizations can and should respond. What follows are my own notes from the conversation, which exceeded the call-in limit of 1,000 clergy participants from various faith backgrounds.

In addition to Dr. Levine, participants included Reverend Mark Tyler of Mother Bethel AME Church on S. 6th St. in Center City Philadelphia and a moderator from the Church Ambassador Network.

Clinical Summary:

As of today, there are 400,000 cases of COVID-19 world-wide and over 17,000 deaths; 47,000 cases in the USA with 588 deaths, and 857 cases in PA with 7 deaths. An exponential rise in the number of new cases is expected in the coming weeks, with cases doubling every 2-3 days.

The significance of what would ordinarily be mind-numbing statistics is that April and May are expected to bring large numbers of cases, with June numbers beginning to reduce. This is a longer period than expected of isolation and confinement for most of us.

That said, numbers will only reduce if all adhere to the current social distancing mandates:

- Handwashing 10-20X/daily
- Repeated use of hand sanitizer
- Sneezing/coughing into your elbow
- Do not touch surfaces that may carry the virus and then touch your face

COVID-19 is most dangerous because no one has immunity, there is no accepted treatment, and no vaccine. According to Dr. Levine, it is more communicable than the flu and more people get it than get the flu.

There is currently a measured, sequential approach underway to end this pandemic. It includes 3 responses:

- Mitigation – preventing the spread through social distancing. All non-life sustaining entities have been ordered to cease operations.
- Testing – now expanding in Pennsylvania; a naso-pharyngeal swab is taken at the drive-through testing centers and sent to a lab for diagnosis. An in-home version is currently in development. Also in development is an antibody test for those who have had the virus and recovered. This will determine whether the person has, in fact, developed immunity to the virus.
- Preparing for surge – ensuring healthcare system has sufficient:

- Staffing
- Beds
- Supplies
- Is operating under crisis (emergency) standards of care

Impact on Faith-Based Organizations:

The most pressing question of many asked by area clergy concerned large gatherings, with the major religious holidays of Ramadan, Passover and Easter on the horizon. The short answer from Dr. Levine: the more you can do by remote, the safer it will be for all. FB Live; Zoom; Meeting Hangout and call-in lines enabling people to listen to live or recorded services are all options.

Though religious institutions are exempt from the stay-at-home policy, people are not exempt from catching COVID-19, especially in groups. A single individual or a handful may gather to livestream/tape a worship service, with the knowledge that the greater the number of people gathered in the same space, the greater the chances of catching the virus.

All clergy are urged to use their discretion in determining how to provide spiritual support and nurture to their congregations. The question of how and when churches, synagogues and mosques might reopen is dependent upon a decreasing rate of rise in the number of new cases, a plateauing of the curve, and consequent sustained downward trend in the outbreak, with decreasing numbers of new cases. When that happens, the governor will consider the appropriate time to issue the order to reopen businesses and resume life “as normal.”

Particular questions raised include:

- Food ministries – food banks can continue to operate (as life-sustaining entities) with staff (volunteer or paid) of ten or less. All social distancing practices must be followed. Religious institutions may cook food for distribution to those in need, again following social distancing practices.
- Religious facilities hosting preschool for children of healthcare workers may or may not continue operations; check the state website for more information.
- Decontamination guidelines for all institutions, including those that are faith-based, are available on the state website.
- Volunteers may drop off food and medication to homebound persons following the no-contact procedures currently in practice by major delivery services (Amazon, FedEx)
- Mobile testing units for inner city residents have been deployed. Guidelines to ensure that uninsured individuals receive testing and treatment are available on the state website.
- All PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) is being reserved for healthcare personnel. Area hospitals have posted requests on social media for PPE with instructions as to how and where to drop off these items.

Bottom line: We all have a role to play. In the words of Dr. Levine: Stay calm, stay home, and stay safe. We will get through this.

Continuing updates can be found on the CDC website (www.cdc.gov) and the state website (www.health.pa.gov).

Rev. Judith A. Dwyer