The Ten Commandments for Coronavirus Prevention in Faith Communities

Dear church leaders,

We take the liberty to share the article "The Ten Commandments for Coronavirus Prevention in Faith Communities" by Dr. Kevin Murriel who leads over 7,000 members as the senior pastor of Cascade United Methodist Church in Atlanta, Georgia.

Several weeks ago, my wife and I were watching the news and witnessed the global panic of COVID-19, better known as Coronavirus. At the time, no known cases had been discovered in the United States. Coronavirus is now reportedly in 85 countries and 17 states in the U.S.

With the rapid spread of COVID-19, many religious leaders and people of faith are questioning how this will directly affect their worship and service in the world. I serve as the senior pastor of one of the largest churches in the Southeast and we, at our core, are a loving congregation. Members and guests come from miles around to feel the “Sweet, Sweet Spirit” of Cascade United Methodist Church. At least 2,000 people visit our church throughout the week and personal contact is inevitable.

After receiving texts and emails from pastor friends and congregants, the concern is the same: how do we keep the fellowship within our congregations vibrant, while remaining safe, as we deal with coronavirus at least for the foreseeable future?

To help me address this concern, I convened a meeting with several top health professionals including my friend and Leadership Atlanta classmate, Dr. Sandra Elizabeth Ford who currently serves as Director of the DeKalb County Board of Health and Interim Director of the Fulton County Board of Health. During this meeting, we discussed best practices for faith communities to implement to prevent the spread of coronavirus and to calm any fear or anxiety regarding the virus.

Here are the Ten Commandments for Coronavirus (COVID-19) Prevention in Faith Communities:

1. THOU SHALL NOT PANIC—It’s important that we educate our congregants using facts not myths. Dr. Robert Murphy, executive director of the Institute for Global Health at Northwestern University’s Feinberg School of Medicine and an infectious diseases professor says, “the one thing we really don’t need is mass hysteria.” “Coronavirus” has been around for years. In humans, coronaviruses infect cells of the upper respiratory and gastrointestinal tract and are responsible for about one third of all common colds.

The current strand of coronavirus, COVID-19, has people most concerned because it has been linked to a higher rate of mortality. However, the CDC estimates that so far this season there have been at least 32 million flu illnesses, 310,000 hospitalizations and 18,000 deaths from the flu. The reality is, we should always be cautious during flu season in particular, but coronavirus should not cause us to panic. Health experts suggest that prevention is the best course of action.

2. THOU SHALL CLEAN THY HANDS REGULARLY AND THOROUGHLY—When coronavirus began to spread, I was going through the airport and saw hundreds of people wearing masks. The next day, a
major news outlet reported that wearing masks is an ineffective practice for controlling the spread of the coronavirus. The number one recommendation was to wash your hands thoroughly, as often as possible, with soap and warm water for at least twenty seconds. Before shaking hands or engaging in any human contact, we should make sure our hands are clean. The CDC also recommends refraining from touching your eyes or mouth before you have washed your hands.

3. THOU SHALL ENGAGE IN SOCIAL DISTANCING— Faith communities are known for “passing the peace” during worship. This is a designated moment of fellowship which often includes hugging, hand shakes, and even greetings with a kiss. I recommend churches continue to the “pass the peace,” but do it while engaging in social distancing. That is, greet one another by touching elbows, waving, nodding, or some other virtual sign of love while being judicious with human contact. Each person should use their discretion with this practice and should not be offended should someone not want to hug or shake hands as they normally would.

4. THOU SHALL MAKE SANITIZER AVAILABLE— If possible, sanitizer should be made available in as many places around the worship facility as possible. Stations should be intentionally positioned at entrances and exits as well as strategically within the worship space. If you have your own sanitizer, use it as often as you need to during worship. Also, you may want to be a good neighbor and offer sanitizer to others as they have need. Ushers, greeters, etc. should wash their hands thoroughly and also have sanitizer and tissue available for worshippers.

5. THOU SHALL LOVE THY NEIGHBOR AND CARE FOR THYSELF— In Matthew 22:39, Jesus says the second greatest commandment is to “love thy neighbor as thyself.” If you are sick or experiencing cold-like symptoms, please love your neighbor enough to stay home from worship and other activities, and love yourself enough to get well and visit a healthcare professional. This is also important for children and youth.

6. THOU SHALL PUT SIGNS IN RESTROOMS— Placing signs in restrooms reminding people to wash their hands thoroughly, and providing instructions for proper hand-washing can be very effective in coronavirus prevention.

7. THOU SHALL NOT DISCRIMINATE— The new strand of coronavirus (COVID-19) originated in China. Since then, there have been numerous incidents of discrimination towards the Asian community. As people of faith, we should affirm all of God’s people as sacred worth and should denounce this type of evil.

8. THOU SHALL BE CONSIDERATE OF VULNERABLE POPULATIONS— Like any health crisis, there are certain populations more at risk that need our attention and care. Our senior citizens, as well as individuals with co-morbid conditions in our congregations should be considered high on our priority list for care. Make regular wellness calls and visits to seniors within your worship community to ensure they have everything they need. We should be doing this regularly anyway, however, it should especially be done until coronavirus is eradicated.

9. THOU SHALL BE WISE WITH TRANSPORTATION— Faith communities with transportation ministries should take precautionary measures to ensure vehicles are thoroughly cleaned inside and that sanitizer is offered in transit. Faith communities doing outreach should ensure all volunteers sign waivers of liability, and should food be distributed, precautions should be taken to protect those being served. For such precautions, refer to commandment #2.

10. THOU SHALL PRAY— After following every commandment and being as cautious as possible, at our core, we are people who believe in the power of prayer. We should pray for God to heal our land. We should pray for the families already affected by COVID-19. We should pray for faith to continue worshipping and serving. We should pray for our leaders and health professionals working diligently to contain and respond to this virus. We should pray and care for each other.

Remember, it’s about prevention, so don’t panic. This, too, shall pass.

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About the writer: Dr. Kevin Murriel leads over 7,000 members as the senior pastor of Cascade United Methodist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. He received his Master of Divinity degree from Candler School of Theology and his Doctor of Ministry
degree from Duke University. A dynamic preacher, avid reader, and social activist, Kevin's research focuses on translating the methods of the Civil Rights Movement into a modern strategy for social justice and racial reconciliation. He is the author of two books, including Breaking the Color Barrier: A Vision for Church Growth through Racial Reconciliation, and he is married to Dr. Ashleigh Murriel. They are the proud parents of their daughter, Scarlett Grace.

Blessing Always (Numbers 6:24-26),

Dr. Andrew L. Foster, III.

RISEM District Superintendent

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