



Ways Churches Can Offer CONNECTION and CARE During Social Distancing

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA

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“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” – John 13:35

As we learn to live differently in this time of social distancing, churches have a unique opportunity to help people remain connected and supported. At this time, we are called to be attentive to the needs around us, invite God to show us how we can serve and respond with creativity and adaptability.

How churches respond will be varied because each of our communities is different. You are encouraged to discern what is best for the particular situation you find yourselves in. Below you will find a list of suggestions for offering connection and support during this time of social distancing.

It is important to note that this is not a checklist. This is an unusual time for everyone, including ministry leaders, so go easy on yourself. These are just a few ideas to get you thinking about what might be helpful in your community at this time. There is no need to “do it all”; even one small thing from this list can have a big impact.

Social Media

With many people turning to social media to connect with others, this is the perfect time to step up your church’s social media presence. You do not need to have exciting videos or fancy photos (although you can if you want); keep it simple by using a few of the ideas below.

ENCOURAGING NOTES AND MESSAGES: Think of social media as a way of sending encouraging notes and messages. For example, inspirational Bible quotes, short video clips of people or session members praying for the congregation, ideas for how to do faith formation at home or uplifting photos. Don’t forget to “share” social media posts from other churches or organizations that you think would be helpful to those following your church on social media.

RECORD OR LIVE STREAM PRAYERS, SERMONS AND MUSIC: Just because congregations are not meeting in person, does not mean that they cannot still gather in a virtual way. You can either record ahead of time or live stream whole services or just parts of the service. Recording ahead of time gives ministry leaders the opportunity to re-record and edit for a more

polished video. Live streaming allows for congregation members to interact in real time during the worship service. The comments section on Facebook Live and YouTube allows for people to add greetings, prayers and comments during the worship service. For more information on live streaming, please see the PCC guide: presbyterian.ca/live-stream.



START AN ONLINE DISCUSSION AND PRAYER GROUP: Choose a time once per week when members or your community will come together online to check in and pray. Ask different leaders from your congregation to facilitate the weekly discussion and prayer time. Consider using Zoom, Skype or another online meeting platform.

Zoom is an easy, reliable cloud platform for video and audio conferencing, chat and webinars. It is free for users to attend meetings and installs quickly onto a computer, tablet or mobile device. The national office of The Presbyterian Church in Canada is helping support and equip congregations and presbyteries in the use of Zoom for online video meetings: presbyterian.ca/2020/03/22/online-meetings.

HAVE VIRTUAL COFFEE TIME ON SUNDAYS: Use an online meeting platform to gather your church community together. Make coffee and tea in your homes and just spend time together chatting and enjoying a late-morning or afternoon fellowship time “together.”

GROW YOUR CHURCH’S SOCIAL NETWORK: This is a good time to intentionally grow your social network. Start “friending” and “following” businesses, non-profits and other places of worship in your community. Pay attention to what their words of wisdom and pressing needs are at the time. If possible, offer to partner on initiatives they are engaged in to support the community at this time.

OFFER PRAYERS AND SUPPORT TO NEIGHBOURS: Don’t forget your neighbours in your social media messaging! Let those living in your neighbourhood and city know that your church is praying for them. If it is possible, offer to take prayer requests by email or social media. If you have people who are healthy and willing, put the offer out there that you will support vulnerable people with getting groceries or running essential errands. Many neighbourhoods and communities have Facebook groups, some of which are specifically dedicated to connecting neighbours during the pandemic. If you aren’t already part of one of these groups, join one and see if your church community can fulfill any of the needs expressed.

Tried and True Ways of Communicating

It is important that we stay connected with congregation members and people in our community who do not have access to the internet or do not have email or social media.

A DEDICATED PASTORAL CARE PHONE LINE: Use one cell phone as your church’s primary pastoral care line. Advertise that number widely in your church community, letting people know that they can call or text the line any time with prayer requests or to express needs. It doesn’t need to be the minister or paid staff answering the calls and texts; make a schedule and share the

phone (after disinfecting, of course). Just be sure that whoever is answering that phone line has appropriate pastoral care training.

ENCOURAGE ELDERS:

Encourage elders to connect with members on a regular basis throughout this period of social distancing. While we cannot visit one another during this time, a phone call or email is the next best thing. One of the most important things an elder can do is show genuine care for those in the congregation right now: ask good questions and listen carefully, and don't forget to pray for those you are connecting with!



LETTERS AND CARDS: Have the children of the church make cards for older or more vulnerable members of the church community. Also consider having leaders in your community (e.g., elders, Christian educators, small group leaders) send cards of encouragement to those in their care. Be aware that the coronavirus can live on cardboard surfaces for 24 hours, so advise those sending and receiving cards to take the necessary precautions.

CREATE A “BUDDY SYSTEM”: Invite older members of the congregation, and anyone who wants to participate, to sign up to be matched with a “buddy” household. The households that are paired together are responsible for calling and checking in on each other daily.

Innovative Ways of Communicating

Now is the time to be creative in the way that we communicate and connect with others. Ask yourself not just what would be helpful for your community but also what would be fun for them.

PARTICIPATE IN COMMUNITY INITIATIVES: There are lots of new and creative ways that neighbours are connecting right now. Some neighbourhoods have weekly creative challenges (e.g., make hearts and put them in your windows, use sidewalk chalk to write encouraging messages on your driveway, hang a decoration from your front tree). Encourage congregation members to participate and, when possible, also ensure the church building is decorated appropriately.

START YOUR OWN INITIATIVE: Why not encourage congregation members to place a candle in their window each evening at 8:00 p.m.? Or write a favourite Bible verse on their sidewalks in chalk? Or pray the same prayer at a certain time of day? Use your imagination and do something that will be helpful for your specific community.

ENCOURAGE MEMBERS OF YOUR COMMUNITY TO SHARE THEIR GIFTS:

Is there a great bread baker in your congregation? Why not encourage them to make a video about baking bread? Do you have a good worship band or choir? Why not do a Facebook Live session with the musicians in your congregation? Is there someone with creative art ideas? Arrange for them to do a live streaming art class. The possibilities are endless.



CREATE NEW BANNER OR PLACARD FOR OUTSIDE OF THE CHURCH:

Announce to your community the way that people can connect digitally through a new banner or placard. It can be ordered online or homemade; the important thing is that your community knows that while the church doors may be closed, the congregation is still active and available to serve neighbours. If you have a church sign that can be changed, be sure that it contains information about how people can connect.

General Tips for Being A Caring Church Community

OFFER CARE TO ALL: This is an excellent time to develop a stronger culture of care in your congregation overall. The aim of creating a culture of caring in your church is not simply about strengthening relationships between people; it is also a sign of the kingdom of God and strengthens our relationships with God. When a person is welcomed, understood, and supported by others in the church community, it shapes their perception of God's love and acceptance. It is important that everyone receive support in a church community. Keep an eye out for those whose needs often get overlooked, including those on the peripheries of the community as well as those who are often the caregivers instead of the receivers of care.

MAKE CARING AN EVERYDAY PRACTICE: In times like this, small acts of kindness mean a lot. Send that text to someone you haven't seen in church in a long time. Write that email you've been meaning to send to an old friend. Make a FaceTime coffee date with a colleague who is juggling working from home with childcare. Ask people how they are doing and genuinely listen to what they say. Speak words of thanks and encouragement whenever possible.

LISTEN AND ASK GOOD QUESTIONS: Caring for others means responding to what they need, which requires that we listen carefully and ask good questions. When someone is telling you about something that is going on in their life, listen without interrupting, judging, or jumping in to fix or solve. Do not assume that you know what someone else needs, even if you've been or are going through similar circumstances. Respond with compassion and, if appropriate, ask what form of support they would appreciate from the church: "I hear you saying that this situation is leaving you feeling _____. Is there anything that we can do to support you?"

