

**A Response to COVID-19 (AKA “The Coronavirus”)
First Baptist Church of West Jefferson, NC
Friday, March 13th (2020)**

Dear Church Family,

These last several weeks have certainly been unsettling times as the coronavirus identified as COVID-19, which is short for Coronavirus 2019, has altered our world. The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, and our president has declared this a national emergency. As we navigate this uncharted territory, I want you to know what we are doing as a church to respond to this virus and its impact on our communities.

First, key leaders in our church met last week (Wednesday, March 4th) to discuss implementing measures during this season of life to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. We agreed that if we were to faithfully live into our vision *to be a harbor of God’s love and a beacon of Christ’s hope*, then we needed to demonstrate that love and offer hope in tangible ways by following Jesus’ commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves. This includes doing what we can to help prevent the spread of a novel coronavirus to our neighbors.

So, this past Sunday we gave fist and elbow bumps in worship, “passed the peace” with verbal greetings such as “God bless you,” and “the peace of Christ be with you.” We have put out extra supplies of hand-sanitizers in strategic locations, and as early as next week we plan to install wall units of hands free automated hand sanitizers on all three floors of our church. We have also discussed adapting the way in which we serve communion in this season of life, and in similar seasons that we may face in the future. We agreed to all make sure to follow some of the basic recommendations by health care providers and organizations to wash our hands thoroughly with antibacterial soap for 20 seconds, don’t touch our faces with unwashed hands, and not attend church activities or events if we were sick or had been exposed to someone who has been sick. We invite everyone in our church to follow these same practices. Also, our custodian Mary Patrick continues to be as diligent and committed as ever to keeping our facilities as clean as possible. When you get a chance, please make sure you thank Mary for the amazing job she does to keep our facilities in such excellent condition.

Then, today (Friday, March 13th) our leadership team met again to assess the evolving situation of the spreading COVID-19. The first decision we made was to **cancel all church activities through Friday, March 27th**. This includes Sunday School and morning worship on March 15th and March 22nd, Wednesday evening activities on March 18th and March 25th, and all small group meetings (WMU, Baptist Men, committees and ministry teams, etc.). We are also encouraging everyone to limit their personal use of our church facilities on an *only-as-is-necessary* basis. Church staff will even be limiting our activity in the church offices and building, working some from home.

These were tough decisions and were not taken lightly. However, a few things helped lead us to this decision. Again, we felt that this was part of our witness to be good neighbors and faithful community partners. Even though there are no confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Ashe County, our governor has recommended that groups of 100 and more not meet to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. This includes faith communities gathering for worship and activities. Our average worship attendance on Sunday morning is between 140 and 180, and Wednesday evening gatherings usually hover around 100. So, this applies to us. We also wanted to show solidarity with some of our neighboring churches, which have already made the decision to cancel services and activities for the next few weeks out of similar concerns of helping to prevent the spread of this virus.

In these circumstances, though, where isolation will certainly challenge our sense of community let me offer some hope. While we will not gather in person for worship and fellowship for two weeks, we have reached out to our neighbors at the West Jefferson United Methodist Church and Mt. Jefferson Presbyterian Church to offer an alternative. On Sunday, March 15th and Sunday March 22nd, the staff members of our churches are going to gather and live stream a worship service for our community. The live stream link will be at www.mjpc.org and will go live at 9:00a.m. I invite you to join us for these virtual worship services led by the staff members of these three churches. It is not ideal, but it will hopefully provide some sense of community worship and keep us connected during this season when the norms of our life together have been disrupted. These services will also be recorded. So, if you miss the live stream, you can go online and watch it later at our website: www.fbcwj.org. Follow the link to our YouTube channel.

Another thing to consider is our church's offerings. The large majority of our church's tithes and offerings still are given when the offering plate is passed on Sunday mornings during our worship together. Because we will not be here to do that for two consecutive Sundays, we are encouraging you to give in one of two ways. One, mail your offering to First Baptist Church, P. O. Box 180, West Jefferson, NC 28694. Two, you can donate online at our website: www.fbcwj.org. On the home page, there is a link titled, "Donate." Click on that and then follow the instructions. This will be extremely helpful to sustaining the ministries of our church during this unique time.

Finally, we always want to be mindful of ways that we can serve each other and our community during this season. It will be particularly important for us to be intentional about doing this by calling, texting, e-mailing, sending messages on social media, or writing a card to those in our congregation in order to stay in touch and foster community. We especially want to do this for those who are in hospitals, nursing homes, assisted care facilities, care givers, and who are "homebound" for various reasons. Many facilities will likely be closed to immediately family only. And if we are not able to visit in person, we need to be committed to reaching out in other ways. We also are mindful that our ministry partners might have extra work if schools close or other public services are unavailable. So, if you are able, you may be needed to help serve alongside those who

are caring for those in our community that are already at a disadvantage. Our church staff, deacons, and mission leaders will be doing our best to lead the way, but it will take us all to work together to serve each other during this time.

Finally, we will continue to assess the evolving COVID-19 pandemic and how we as a church should respond. We will do our best to communicate often and effectively. We will utilize e-mail, our church's all-call system, Facebook, and our church's website. Please be sure to check these frequently for updated information. You can also reach out to one of our staff to get or give updates. We don't have a crystal ball, and do not know how, when, or if our lives will continue to be altered by COVID-19. Let us continue to exercise the fruit of the Holy Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control," for "if we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22-23, 25). It is the Spirit of God that will guide us and sustain us.

Grace and Peace,
Michael