

COVID-19: Altering the Status Quo

Pastoral Outreach

CONSIDERATIONS BY MARK MOGILKA

Connecting with parishioners and the broader community in our health crisis world today is more important than ever. Given the scope of rising unemployment, increasing weeks of isolation and resulting loneliness, families, the elderly, and others are in great need of basic resources, etc. Our call to love and support one another in our parishes, neighborhoods, communities and the world seems louder and more insistent than ever.

What can we do as a parish community for one another, as well as family and friends who are not members and those in the immediate neighborhood of the parish?

- **Checking in—Contact each household in your parish.** Organize staff and volunteers to make phone calls, send personal emails, do facetime calls, zoom or skype calls, send letters or personal notes via snail mail.
- **Contact Catholic Charities to find out what your parish can do to support their efforts to help people through these challenging times.** Find out what services they, and other community agencies, are providing. Make those resources known to parishioners, their family members who are not members of the parish, friends and co-workers as well as others in your neighborhood who may not be aware of these resources.
- **The need for food and medications for those who are unable (elderly or homebound) or at high risk due to health concerns to pick up essential items is a challenge.** Are there ways to reach out to homebound or elderly parishioners, help them to order essential items online or arrange for a volunteer from the parish go to the store or pharmacy to pick up items and deliver them to the doors of the homebound
- **Consider sharing employment opportunities.** News reports indicate that there are some businesses that are hiring, such as Amazon, Walmart, Target, etc. There may be business owners from the parish that have job openings. Include information on these openings in your weekly communications.
- **Set up a support group for those who are unemployed.** This could be done via virtual gatherings. Provide an opportunity for small groups of people to provide support for one another as they explore job searches, revise budgets, learn strategies from one another for securing employment. Help one another find out what community programs and services might be available to help.

- **Provide household economic help:**
 - **Financial Support:** Does your parish have a fund to help households meet basic bills? Do parishioners know that such a fund exists? Could such a fund be set up and provide parishioners with an opportunity to donate to it?
 - **Budget counseling:** Can your parish provide a webinar on how to set up a budget and manage a budget with reduced income? Some Catholic Charities programs provide these services. Advertise it beyond your parish community.
 - **Managing Retirement Savings:** As the stock market has plunged, many are concerned about management of retirement savings and investments. Is there someone in your parish or local community who would do an excellent webinar on this topic?
- **Affirm Community Heroes in weekly communications.** Suggest ways parishioners can send thank you notes, leave messages on the doorsteps of neighbors who are in health care fields, those who support health care, police, fire, first responders, ambulance services, grocery store staff, those who risk contact with public on regular basis to provide essential services (those who deliver mail and packages, pick up trash, keep utilities going, food processing workers, truckers etc.). Make sure that your weekly livestreamed Mass includes prayers of petition for these heroes.
- **There continues to be some shortages of personal protection equipment,** particularly masks, for health care professionals, but also for members of the community who are seeking them out got use in visits to retail establishments. Might those who have been active in such things as “Prayer Shawl Ministries” be asked to convert to sewing face masks? Find out which health care facilities are in need and or make them available in the vestibule of church for not just parishioners, but anyone from the broader community who might like one. Put a sign outside church so people from the neighborhood know they are available—help yourself.
- **A recent study reported in April 20 edition of America noted that:**
 - “Young people are experiencing heightened levels of loneliness and isolation as a result of social distancing they are not experiencing a decline in their faith.”
 - “35% of respondents say they are actually experiencing an increase in faith and 46% attest to having developed new religious practices.”
 - “44% report feeling isolated because no one has reached out to them.”
 - “The study found a severe lack of trust in institutions. On a scale of 1 to 10, over 60% of young people rank their trust level at 5 or lower for a range of institutions, including organized religion.”

What can be done to provide outreach and support for young adults in their faith journey and formation? How can parishioners include them in pastoral outreach—such as volunteers for many of the suggestions in this article?

Connecting with the Broader Community

- **Invite young adults to come to an online wine and beer session and share their favorite glass of wine or beer and pairing.** Using Zoom or one of the other social meeting platforms have an open session for 20 – 30 minutes then randomly assign participants to discussion meet and greet groups with discussion questions before returning to large group.

With parents of pre-school children—Zoom or other online time to share life, war stories, ideas of how to entertain and pass the time, or plug into educational opportunities.

- **Support Local Businesses:** Many businesses in the immediate community or where parishioners are owners or employees are struggling to survive or maintain their work force by providing call-in ordering and curb side pickup. Put together a list of those businesses with phone numbers or links to their menus and lists of services and post on the parish website. Every week highlight a different business or two.
- **Many local social service organizations have ramped up services to help provide food, mental health, unemployment services.** Put together a list of these services on parish website. Each week highlight one of them and include information on how parishioners can make donations to support these services. Note how to make contributions of food or money to food pantries. Use your church entryway as a place that people can drop off food contributions that are then forwarded to food pantries in your community.
- **There are local parish chapters of St. Vincent de Paul Society or area stores that provide services.** Contact them to see how your parish might support them in their efforts and what services might be available for your community—their family members, friends, co-workers, neighbors in need.

Key Challenging Question

- **A year or more from now when (hopefully) our world has migrated to a “new normal” will your parishioners, their family members, neighbors and co-workers and those not members but who live in the immediate neighborhoods look back and say things like—thank God St. Mary’s was there for us through this crisis?** Will parishioners be able to say that because of the efforts of St. Mary’s—they are proud to say that yes—they are members of the parish because of how they practiced and lived the gospel during these challenging times?