

## **Responding to the Coronavirus Challenge**

Update: March 13, 2020

The landscape continues to change hourly as we work together to address concerns related to the coronavirus. In light of the most recent events we want to update you concerning Stow Alliance Fellowship's responses.

**Stow Alliance Fellowship will be suspending indefinitely all gatherings for ministries and services effective Saturday evening, March 14.** (This means, among other things, we will not be gathering for worship on Sunday, March 15).

This creates questions, I am sure. Let's address a couple of those.

### **Why are we doing this?**

- Those in authority over us desire this response. Governor DeWine has banned gatherings over 100 and while this ban does not extend to churches, it appears clear that it is the state's desire that such gatherings do not take place. Similarly, we have heard from our denominational leadership and they have not forbidden our gathering together, but have made clear it is their desire that we not do so at this time. We live as a people under authority, both within the state and within the church. That involves obedience, but it also involves honoring those placed by God in positions of authority. This means not only doing what they demand, but understanding what they want and doing our best to provide that when we can (Romans 13:1ff; 1 Peter 2:13-17; Hebrews 13:17).
- Our target group for ministry (Stow and the surrounding communities) could perceive any gathering of people as a public threat to safety. Instead of loving and prioritizing the needs of others (1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11, 12; Phil. 2:1-11), we may actually be seen as unloving for continuing to come together despite the pleas of leadership to do otherwise. Jesus modeled a response in which compliance was not mandatory spiritually speaking, but in order not to give offense He complied (Matt. 17:25-27).

### **Why suspend all "indefinitely"?**

- We are suspending "indefinitely" because the changes going on around us are too rapid for us to adequately anticipate what the coming hours, days and weeks may hold. We will update you with any changes as soon as possible.

### **What am I supposed to do on Sunday morning?**

- For this week, I will be recording a video for you that will be accessible by 9:00 a.m. on Sunday morning. A link to this video will be available on our church website and we will send out an email with the link as well. We can all help circulate it to all our people via social media.
- If we continue to be unable to gather for worship in the coming weeks, we'll advise you regarding our efforts to provide a livestream service to access.

- Many rightly view their giving as part of their worship. We encourage those of you who already do so to utilize the online giving option. Others can send your gift via check through the postal system.

We will continue to update you by way of email and the webpage as developments require new responses.

We urge you to continue to practice the safeguards our public officials hold forth. Continue to check [www.coronavirus.gov](http://www.coronavirus.gov) for the latest developments on that front.

In the meantime, let us underscore the spirit of our communication from March 12 (see below). These actions do not change the need to rise up in faith and be a people of faith, prayer, hope, and ministry. Move toward others. Reach out to others. Hear their concerns. Listen to and pray with them. Take the hope of Christ to the believing and to those who have no hope in this life or beyond it.

### **Responding to the Coronavirus Challenge**

March 12, 2020

As the virus that causes COVID-19 (coronavirus) continues to spread, sad stories multiply around the world at alarming rates every day. What is Stow Alliance Fellowship's response to these challenges?

Those who are at higher risk of developing COVID-19 include older adults and those with serious medical conditions (e.g., heart or lung disease, compromised immune system). If you are a part of this group, we urge you to use appropriate and abundant caution by avoiding crowds and limiting your exposure to others who may be sick.

If you are having symptoms of ill-health, call your doctor first and remain at home out of love for others. Also, please communicate your need by calling the church office so we can pray for you and help meet your needs.

We should all practice the various disciplines public health officials continue to preach as safeguards to our health. This includes avoiding close contact with those who are sick, washing your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds especially after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing, or having been in a public place, and other important precautions. Please visit [www.coronavirus.gov](http://www.coronavirus.gov) for more information.

As for church closings, currently our government is not requiring churches to close. So, at this time, Stow Alliance Fellowship will continue our regular schedule of worship services and ministries.

As for pre-school closing, the Stow Alliance Preschool has a long standing policy to shadow the decision-making of the Stow-Munroe Falls Public School system with regard to closures. This typically centers on weather related issues. We will be doing the same with regard to decisions about closures related to the current health crisis with the coronavirus.

This is a rapidly developing situation. So, if any of these recommendations change, we will notify you as quickly as we can.

We grieve for those who have lost loved ones to the virus around the world and pray for those currently infected. We pray also for health and government leaders as they seek to help us all navigate this crisis with wisdom, civility and calm.

We also have gospel workers in countries where the governments have shut down all schools and churches. They have appropriately complied with their governing authority's decisions.

Let me say a word to the rest of us. Do not fear. Do not be afraid. This is one of the most frequently repeated commands in the Bible. Do not be controlled by fear. Caution is not fear. Wisdom is not fear. Prudence is not fear. Fear paralyzes. Fear incites panic. Fear makes us vulnerable to sensationalism, rumor, and silliness.

Fear not. Our God is still on the throne. He is good. He is wise. He is powerful. Let's pray. Let's *come together* and pray. Let's gather in His Name and worship Him. Let's find solace and guidance in our corporate worship together. Let us not give way to fear, but rise up in faith.

As the Apostle Paul told Timothy, "God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control" (2 Tim. 1:7). Let us operate in the love and power of God. Let us reason with minds driven not by fear, but by the wisdom and mission of God.

We are promised that we live under the constant keeping of God. Consider again, now in the context of our present crisis, the amazing hope held out to us in Psalm 91.

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High  
will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

<sup>2</sup> I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress,  
my God, in whom I trust."

<sup>3</sup> For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler  
and from the deadly pestilence.

<sup>4</sup> He will cover you with his pinions,  
and under his wings you will find refuge;  
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

<sup>5</sup> You will not fear the terror of the night,

nor the arrow that flies by day,  
<sup>6</sup> nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness,  
nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.  
<sup>7</sup> A thousand may fall at your side,  
ten thousand at your right hand,  
but it will not come near you.  
<sup>8</sup> You will only look with your eyes  
and see the recompense of the wicked.  
<sup>9</sup> Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place—  
the Most High, who is my refuge—  
<sup>10</sup> no evil shall be allowed to befall you,  
no plague come near your tent.  
<sup>11</sup> For he will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you in all your ways.  
<sup>12</sup> On their hands they will bear you up,  
lest you strike your foot against a stone.  
<sup>13</sup> You will tread on the lion and the adder;  
the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot.  
<sup>14</sup> “Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him;  
I will protect him, because he knows my name.  
<sup>15</sup> When he calls to me, I will answer him;  
I will be with him in trouble;  
I will rescue him and honor him.  
<sup>16</sup> With long life I will satisfy him  
and show him my salvation.”

Let's be strong and courageous. Let's offer ourselves to God to serve others who do not have the hope that is in Christ. Instead of disengaging and distancing ourselves, let's move toward others with compassion, care and prayer. Reach out. Call. Text. Check on others. Offer to pray with and for others.

Consider how Christians have responded in some similar situations throughout history.

Charles Spurgeon, famed pastor of the Gospel Tabernacle of London, lived and ministered during the 1854 cholera outbreak that swept through the city. It was Psalm 91 that strengthened him to engage in ministry more deeply, rather than withdraw: [article](#). Here is a summation of his counsel to the people he shepherded in those challenging days: [article](#).

Consider also the faith-filled, compassionate response of Christians to the plague that swept through Rome between 250-270 A.D. As people died at a rate as high as 5,000 per day, the Christians made it their aim to move into the infected areas, to minister to the sick, to bring the hope of Christ to the dying. They found that God redeemed that terrible moment for good by making it a remarkable gospel-opportunity: [article](#).

Let us find this not an hour of retreat, but of advance. Not a day of terror, but of love. Not a season of fear, but of faith. May God enable us in this troubled time to be a gospel-minded people of prayer, compassion, service, faith and love.