

MEMPHIS CLERGY RESPONSE TO COVID-19

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has led to real suffering in our community. Our response to this suffering, to be sufficient, must be a fully human response. It must connect us to the deepest level of our being. Maya Angelou once wrote "Alone, all alone / Nobody, but nobody / can make it out here alone." Human contact and comfort are what we desire. We are always better together, and it is together that we will find healing, that we will survive.

As faith leaders of Memphis and West Tennessee, we are certain that the response to this virus and the destruction it has rendered requires moral leadership that seeks to do what is right for everyone in our city. And so, we write these words united by the common principle of our faiths: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Our way forward cannot be driven by solely economic or political desires. The way forward must be person-centered, for every life is near to the heart of God. No one is expendable. Therefore, we are committed to work together following these principles.

- 1. We will rely on the medical and scientific community as our primary resource for information.** We are committed to following their guidance through encouraging widespread testing, practicing physical distancing, supporting contact tracing, and quarantining when necessary.
- 2. We will work collaboratively to responsibly care for those who contract COVID-19.** We need each other. With guidance from our local leaders, we will engage our congregations in sharing resources and skills where we are able. Through feeding ministries, caring for those in isolation, sewing masks, supporting small businesses, and myriad other modalities, we will respond together in ways that address the needs of those most impacted by this virus.
- 3. We will collaborate to determine when returning to in-person worship is possible.** We are united in believing that God grieves with us through this present suffering and although in-person worship is central to our faith practices, we will not gather together until it is clearly safe to do so. We will do all we can to support one another as we seek to make decisions collectively with faith leaders across the area, while discouraging faith communities from making decisions on their own. Keeping in mind the unique needs of urban, suburban, and rural congregations, we will follow the knowledge and advice of local health professionals and civic leaders to guide when and how we reopen.
- 4. We will continue to speak up.** We recognize our responsibility to amplify the voices of the vulnerable and marginalized, those who are most impacted by COVID-19, as it harms bodies and exposes the flaws in our social fabric. We will continue to be in conversation with our local government leaders as they discern the way forward to ensure that we do what is right for every Memphian and resident across Western Tennessee.

Memphis is a city where matters of faith touch every aspect of our communal life. We do not presume to speak for all clergy in the city and surrounding areas, but we hope that our voices reflect the wide and deep fabric of Memphis and West Tennessee's congregational life. Our common belief that God is present in our lives, and that God calls us to care for one another, grounds us as we stand firm in our commitment to weather this ordeal together with one voice and one hope: we will get through this. We may not see the road ahead as clearly as we would like, but we know that God will walk with us if we remain humble and seek to care for each other with compassion.

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