

## **Lolo Community Church statement about COVID-19**

I want to take a few minutes to address our current circumstances and the Coronavirus or COVID-19 epidemic. You can freely get opinions on the news, on social media and from your friends. How should the church, and specifically our church, respond?

Believe it or not, this is a great opportunity for the church to shape the culture around us. This is a time of disruption and crisis, a time for the church to show the world what difference Christ makes in our lives.

This is a difficult time for two reasons. First, we need to change the norms of social interaction overnight. This might not seem necessary for some, but science tells us that the measures that will actually make a difference always need to be acted on sooner than we typically think. Second, we need to redirect our energies from fear, anxiety and panic to love and preparation. This is an opportunity for us to love and care for one another. COVID-19 is considerably more deadly than the flu virus, especially for vulnerable people like the elderly and those with existing medical conditions. Most people will exhibit few or mild symptoms, but a severe case involves pneumonia and a great deal of specialized medical treatment. There is a very real risk that left unchecked, this virus will overwhelm our health care system. This is what is currently happening in northern Italy, where people with other serious medical conditions cannot find treatment because the system is overwhelmed by COVID-19.

So, we need to change our behavior as individuals and as a church. Love, not fear is the reason we are changing that behavior. Our vulnerable community members are at grave risk. This is a situation where, as the Bible speaks to, the strong should consider the weak. The choices we make are not made to minimize our own risk, but to protect others among us. No one is calling for steps driven by panic, fear or worry – none of those is a Christian way of thinking. We are to be prepared for what is coming – that is wisdom – but not driven by fear, freeing us to serve others when needed. This is not the end of the world, but it may well cause a severe by temporary disruption to our normal way of life. Be prepared for it, act wisely and trust God. There is a reason the most frequent command in Scripture is “Do not be afraid.” Life can be scary, especially in times like this, but God is still in control and He is still good. Remember, nothing, even a severe case of COVID-19, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

What do we plan to do as a church at the present time?

1. At this time, we will cancel Sunday School and our normal worship service starting March 22. Please know that the sermons are always available on our church website. They are typically uploaded by Tuesday. As well, starting on March 22, we will broadcast the full service using Facebook Live. Simply “like” the church’s Facebook page and you can just connect with your phone or computer and watch the service at home at its normal time. We are also looking for people who will be willing to open their homes on Sunday morning to host a small group of people to watch the service and worship together. Please contact the church office (273-6367) if you are willing to do that. If we cannot or should not gather as a large group, we can still gather to fellowship and worship in a number of smaller communities of faith. So if you do not want to worship alone or have no access to Facebook, please consider joining one of the small groups meeting in the Lolo and Missoula area.
2. We want to encourage a different level of social interaction. We do not have to shake hands or hug in order to demonstrate love for one another. We encourage the use of disinfection protocols. Stacy, our custodian, will be applying those in her cleaning of the church building. We strongly encourage you to wash your hands thoroughly before and after any church event.
3. We encourage our church ministries to use wisdom and prudence in their choices to meet. The CDC has advised that groups over 50 people should not meet. Our larger ministries, like Sunday School and AWANA, will cancel for a time, effective immediately. In the future, there may be other ministries which temporarily shut down or are encouraged not to meet. We ask those involved and affected to please accept that news with grace and with a love that is driven to protect our most vulnerable members.

There is every reason to hope that this epidemic will pass. But as believers, our real hope is rooted in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and his future return, which will end all sickness, disease and death. As a result, we have an amazing opportunity to act redemptively during this time – in faith and joy and love, rather than fear, worry and panic. We have the opportunity to show others the difference Christ makes in our lives. We should be ready, as Scripture encourages us, to share the source of the hope that is within us.

Think about it this way. What will our neighbors and friends remember about our behavior, our choices and our attitudes when this is over? Will they remember that we panicked like they did? Or that we were examples of wisdom, trust, joy and love even in the midst of sickness or dislocation of our way of life? Will they remember that we worried or were angry or swore like they did about our circumstances? Or will they see examples of grace even as our daily lives change drastically?

Our friends and neighbors will notice how we respond in these times. Are we going to look just like the worried or angry world, or are we going to reflect Christ and perhaps be able to make a life-changing difference in the lives of those around us?