

An Outreach Plan for Clergy During the Pandemic

Meeting the Spiritual / Emotional / Physical Needs of Our Parishioners

The Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church is extremely concerned for the wellbeing of our people in the extraordinary circumstances of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Bowing to the urgent advice of health and government authorities, in-person worship and gatherings of any kind have been suspended in our churches until further notice. Without this weekly face-to-face interaction, it is more important than ever for pastors and parish leadership to reach out to the community in creative ways, to ascertain who is in need, and who would be able to help.

We are all aware that there is a vulnerable population among us in this situation. Our parishes all have sizable elderly populations, and this is the group at highest risk for infection by the virus. Other at-risk groups include shut-ins (and others who live alone), single parents, recent arrivals and their families.

At the same time, these circumstances are completely new to everyone, and no one can be sure how they will react to the uncertainty over time. Even people who have always seemed emotionally strong, physically robust, and successful in life are going to be subject to stress, depression, and the discouragement of isolation.

Therefore the way we reach out and communicate with our parishioners is very important. The tone we strike must be measured and patient, confident and faithful; expressing love and concern for people, and reassuring them against their ever-present fears. As Bishop Daniel has said, Christ's emphasis on faith in a loving God is *not* a false hope or sentimental feeling; it is rather a divine power that dispels fear, and gives us confidence to face life's challenges. The Church strives to be the compassionate hands and energetic feet of the Body of Christ on earth—and that is the ministry each of us is undertaking in our local communities.

The following pages present ideas for pastoral leadership and outreach during this challenging time, suggested by our brother clergy of the Eastern Diocese. As you enact these ideas, please ensure that all of your outreach is in compliance with the current local, state, and federal regulations issued to contain and mitigate the Coronavirus pandemic.

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REACH OUT SPIRITUALLY:

- **Remind the faithful that as their priest you are available** to pray or talk about any of their needs and concerns, or any assistance they need. You can pray with them through phone or video.
- **Broadcast liturgical or prayer services** (via Facebook, for example) where possible. If not possible in your circumstances, link your parishioners to the services being broadcast by other parishes.
- **Provide regular spiritual guidance** via e-mail, social media, YouTube, or Facebook. Messages can be short, inspirational; focused on hope, peace of mind, and God's strengthening presence in uncertain times. Regularity and frequency of messaging (every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, for example) is a good practice.
- **See below for sample messages** to use in parish communications.
- **Show special pastoral attention to those who had planned sacramental ceremonies** during this period. Weddings have been cancelled completely; baptisms and funerals strictly curtailed and restricted. Reach out to the affected families, in advance when possible, to comfort their feelings of anxiety and frustration.
- **Remember that you as an Armenian priest are not alone:** Your brother clergy are all in the same situation, and are a great resource for advice and guidance on specific circumstances you may encounter.

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REACH OUT WITH PRACTICAL INFORMATION:

- **Discourage parishioners from gathering** or socializing anywhere during this time, including at each other's homes.
- **E-mail practical, helpful information** regarding the COVID-19 Virus. Especially stress the basic guidelines provided by health authorities like the Centers for Disease Control:
 - a. Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
 - b. Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.
 - c. Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
 - d. Put distance between yourself and other people if COVID-19 is spreading in your community. This is especially important for people at high risk of getting infected.
 - e. Stay home if you are sick, except to get medical care.
 - f. When you cough or sneeze, cover your mouth and nose with a tissue OR use the inside of your elbow.
- **Provide local state and health resources**, websites, and phone numbers. Here are some important links:
 - a. The [Centers for Disease Control](#)
 - b. The [World Health Organization](#)
 - c. The [Armenian American Health Professionals Organization](#) (AAHPO)

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REACH OUT BY MODELING BEST PRACTICES:

- **Keep the church closed to the public** until instructed otherwise. The entire Armenian Church hierarchy is fully supporting this urgent practice, which we are assured is absolutely necessary in the present circumstances.
- **All meetings should be done via conference call.** FreeConferenceCall.com is one among many platforms that provide these services.
- **Make sure the church is cleaned** with Lysol and other disinfecting cleaning items. This includes the sanctuary and all facilities. Disinfect all pews, vessels, pew books, doorknobs and handles, surfaces and tables, etc.

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REACH OUT TO ENSURE PHYSICAL NEEDS:

- With your Parish Council, **create a communication plan** for your parish. Secure Parish Council members and other reliable volunteers (assuming they are healthy and have not tested positive for COVID-19) to be a part of the outreach team.
- **Identify members in the high-risk classification** (elderly; those with heart/respiratory illness; diabetics; those with compromised immunity). Make a listing of names, phone numbers, and addresses.
- Nearly all elders (even active ones) are effectively shut-ins for the duration of this pandemic. For elders with a support system of active, nearby family, reach out to a family member to check in and offer help. For elders who are alone, make regular contact with them directly to check on their physical needs. **Designate a volunteer for each shut-in** (ideally find someone who lives in the same vicinity of a high-risk parishioner).
- **Clergy have been largely restricted from entering nursing homes in person.** However, they can call nursing homes, speak to the directors, and ask to be connected to resident parishioners to talk and pray.
- **As pastor, contact shut-ins personally** to offer food, necessary items, or financial assistance.
 - a. Do they have enough food, especially non-perishable items? Do they need someone to do grocery shopping and drop off items at their homes? (Please remember that for social-distancing purposes volunteers *should not enter residences.*)
 - b. Do they have Kleenex, toilet paper, over-the-counter medicines (Tylenol, cough drops, cough medicine, etc.)?
 - c. Do they need warm meals provided (through delivery services)?
- **As pastor, make certain you are kept up to date** about every step taken in the name of the church.

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SAMPLE OUTREACH SOLICITATION LETTER:

*“A new commandment I give to you: that you love one another...
By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love for one another.”
(Jn 13:34-35)*

Dear Faithful of (insert the name of your church):

As I write this message in this extraordinary time, I know that many of you are wondering what tomorrow will bring. What we thought would be impossible only days ago, has now turned into our reality. Millions of people have been asked to stay home from work or school, and the ensuing days bring uncertainty for our whole nation.

Please know that the entire Armenian Church is in the deepest mode of prayer for our people—from the Catholicos of All Armenians, to our Diocesan Primate, to clergy in every local parish, including our own.

Certainly we are called to be prayerful and to increase our faith during times like this. But we are also called as Christians to think of our brothers and sisters during a time of crisis.

With this in mind, I am calling upon the loving and Christian spirit of our community to pull together to help others among us. I am asking for volunteers to help out with the following:

- Pharmacy runs for the elderly;
- Helping to make phone calls to do a wellness check;
- Light grocery shopping and delivery for our most vulnerable.

Please call (insert name) or e-mail (insert e-mail address) if you need assistance in any of these areas. And if you are able to help with any of these tasks, please make that know to the same contact address.

[Name of church] Armenian Church is a *living* church. In these days the public is not permitted to gather in the sanctuary for worship; but do not hesitate to drive by our church to say a prayer from your car. Remember that we are protected under the shadow of the Holy Cross standing majestically over our church, and over us all.

With love and prayers,

[Signature of Pastor]
[Typed Name of Pastor]
Pastor

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SAMPLE MESSAGES TO SEND TO YOUR COMMUNITY:

- *A message regarding self-care:*

“You may be feeling isolated and lonely at times, but we are in this together. Contact your friends and family by phone and talk to them, text them, message them, FaceTime them. Don’t go it alone. If you need help, ask: I am here and others are here for you. Spend quality time with your family and with yourself. Be gentle with yourself, go for a walk on a nice day, read a book, laugh and play games. Pray more, self-evaluate more, learn something new, practice a new skill. Don’t go overboard on social media. But social distance from people.”

- *A message of inspiration and encouragement:*

“As I love and pray for my own family, I love my parish family and pray daily for your well-being, safety, and health. Our church hymn ‘*Shnorhya Mez Der*’ (‘Grant Us, O Lord’), based on verses from the Biblical book of Isaiah, assures us with the words: ‘*Zee Asdvadz unt mez eh*’—‘For God is with us.’ In our most challenging times, even in our suffering, God is with us. May our God of mercy, compassion, and love bring His peace to your heart, and to all of our families.”

- *A message for our youth:*

“I’m just checking in with you to see how you’re doing during these days. Please know that I keep you and your families in my prayers, and if you think I can be of any help to you, please do not hesitate to text or call me. Here’s a meaningful Scripture to reassure you that God is our helper and comforter: Psalm 91 (you can Google it and pray it). Don’t forget that I care for you like my own kids. God bless you.”

- *A personal message from the heart:*

“During this time of anxiety, distress, and uncertainty, I thank God for the love, mercy, comfort, peace, and hope He gives us, His children. During the trials of my own life, I have turned to a certain passage of St. Paul’s Letter to the Philippians for strength and understanding. It always gives me a feeling of calm, clarity, and inner peace—and I will be praying this tonight for you, as we go through this unprecedented time together:

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, noble, right, and pure; whatever is lovely and admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned from me or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4:4-8).

In this time of great unease, let us make room for faith and the peace of our Lord to enter our hearts and minds. May God bless, keep, and protect you, and may His peace envelope you tonight, and always.

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