

Dear Friends and Members of River Hills Church:

I pray that this message finds you all in the best of health and spirits!

This prayer takes on special significance right now because communities around the world, including our own, are adjusting to the realities of the global pandemic called COVID-19 (also known as Coronavirus 2019). COVID-19 is a fast-spreading respiratory disease and our desire is to do our very best to end the spread of the disease while protecting ourselves and those who are most vulnerable among us. There are elements that are outside of our control as we face this disease, but there is also much within our control that we can do to make a difference. Graciously considering the well-being of others is central to being a follower of Jesus, and so I'm calling the River Hills community to do everything in our power to combat the spread of this disease!

Please read this entire email, as you'll find some general reminders, a summary of some practical steps that we are undertaking for our collective well-being (*suspending public gatherings, encouraging online worship, and continuing our commitment to providing the childcare ministry to our community*), and encouragement as we move forward together.

Reminders to the Church as We Respond to COVID-19:

Don't panic, but prepare.

Stay informed and thoughtfully consider how you might wisely prepare for this new public health reality. Your church will play a role in our community. Help one another by remembering to talk about your questions, worries, and concerns, learn and adjust your activity as needed, but do not be overwhelmed or driven by fear or worry.

Reject anxiety and racism.

Even as there is growing concern and heightened awareness around the way this particular virus can spread, know that the targeting of Chinese Americans, Asian Americans, and those who have traveled internationally is already occurring. This harms our community. Speak out and pray against this reality and injustice.

Proactively learn.

Seek knowledge and understand what the risks are and are not at this point. COVID-19 will be a part of our lives for the near future. Do not dismiss the concerns of others. It should not be taken lightly, but also do not allow it to paralyze you. It does seem to easily spread, stay on hard surfaces for a long time, and impact certain high risk populations who have already been advised to protect their health and exposure. Consider how these facts might impact you, your family, and our community.

Care for those at risk.

Look beyond your immediate concerns. Keep an eye on how to care for those most at risk in this season, including those without access to health care, those with weakened immune systems or underlying health conditions, those who are struggling with housing or poverty, or those without regular sanitization and health care. Watch out for and pray for those more vulnerable to public health concerns.

Consider what might be needed in these communities and how to respond. Call and check in with one another to ease the isolation and encourage each other on this journey.

Practice smart hygiene.

Help prevent the spread of germs for the sake of the wider community and public health. Wash your hands frequently for at least 20 seconds; use hand sanitizer with high alcohol content as a good second option. Clean public/hard surfaces you use more frequently. We will also increase sanitizing hard surfaces and high-traffic surfaces at church, as well. If you are willing to volunteer in this effort, we would appreciate your help. Please e-mail the church office; RiverHills@RiverHillsUMC.org to indicate interest. Refrain from touching your face or mouth regularly, and always wash your hands before eating. Stay home if you have a cough or a fever.

If you feel sick in any way, or have cold or flu-like symptoms, then please stay home for your safety and the safety of others. There is no shame in being careful and no prize for “pressing on” during these times. Please take full advantage of joining us remotely for worship, listening to the sermon online, and staying connected to us and with one another as you get back to full health.

Consider wise and measured lifestyle adjustments - but still live!

It is wise to pay attention to these health realities, especially when you are part of communal gatherings and in public spaces. Seek out informed, trustworthy resources through these links to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Minnesota Department of Health, and World Health Organization (WHO) websites for their recommendations. Continue to listen to medical professionals and public health leaders so that we can accurately adjust behavior to match the risk and reality of our public health, and also reject any sense of panic, fear, racism, or stockpiling supplies, all of which damage public health in the long run.

If you or anyone in your family happens to contract the disease, our desire is to walk through this with you! **If you are self-quarantined or are diagnosed, we ask you to please inform our pastoral team, so that we might offer prayer, care, and support.** We will honor your wishes to remain anonymous, but will use that information to contact others that may have been in contact with you. If you are feeling anxious about going out due to being vulnerable to this illness and need assistance in any way, we do have people that have offered to help out by running errands or picking up groceries. They can simply pick up or drop off outside of your home to make sure you have the things you need.

SUNDAY SPECIFIC ADJUSTMENTS

While this is not an exhaustive list, here is a list of some specific changes we're making to care for our community as we gather on Sundays and at other special gatherings.

Church-Wide Precautions

- We've posted the CDC guidelines as a reminder in all bathrooms.
- Hand sanitizer at Welcome Desk, in the Bosshardt Room, and in the small squirt bottles in the pews.
- We have increased wiping down main entrance handles, all exterior and interior handles, drinking fountains, handrails, and Welcome Desk.

- We will be suspending public worship beginning this Sunday (March 15) and encourage everyone to call in for worship (toll-free 1-877-304-9269, entry code 643-322) or [click on this link](#) to connect over the internet. We will also be attempting to Go Live on our Facebook page. If you are on Facebook, be sure to like River Hills United Methodist Church and you should be notified of our livestream. Dialing in has limited quality with music and will only be audio. The Facebook Live will allow for audio and video. We will be learning as we go and would love your feedback. This will be an ongoing option that will be offered on Sunday mornings. Simply call in or log in a little before 9:00 a.m. or 11:05 a.m. Sunday morning. While it is not the same as gathering together in person, it will help us to stay connected in these difficult times. We will notify you when we feel it is right to gather again in person for worship.
- We still depend on your support and your offerings to support the ministry of the church. Many give online these days. If you haven't done so before, this may be a great time to start giving that way! Info on online giving [can be found here](#)
- The River Hills Early Childhood Center is an important outreach to our community. The health of our community is important to the health of this ministry. If we experience a confirmed case of COVID-19, the Center will be shut down for a two-week self-quarantine. Contingency plans are currently being prepared.
- We will be suspending RHUMCafe, Coffee Hour, Bible Study, and other classes until further notice. Remote options may be available for Bible Study and classes. Attendees will be notified of those plans.
- The church office will remain open to help coordinate remote ministries and outreach. Staff will be available by appointment, but will remain closed to the public or drop in visits. Simply call the office if you'd like to meet. It's important as we will need to monitor those who are in the building much more closely.
- In accordance to the request of Minnesota health officials and to protect the operations of the River Hills Early Childhood Center, we will suspend the use of the church for public gatherings beginning March 15 until further notice. The Church Council will be asked to gather for a virtual emergency meeting on Sunday evening at 7 p.m. to affirm or amend this position. If you would like to join us for that meeting, feel free to call in (toll-free 1-877-304-9269, entry code 643-322#) or [click on this link](#) to connect over the internet.

We received word on Thursday that the first diagnosis in Dakota County has been reported. Please feel free to send us your questions at RiverHills@RiverHillsUMC.org. Our promise to you is that as more becomes known about COVID-19, we'll continue to update our plan and will communicate those plans to the congregation in a timely manner.

In times of unrest and uncertainty, we have some assurances from God that we can look to and find hope. We might not have answers to every question that comes up and many among us may struggle with the "what ifs" that will arise, but we can learn to trust God's faithfulness, God's protection, and God's will. **Psalm 46** is one of my favorite portraits of God's character and one that we can lean on in times like this:

*God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,*

*though the mountains tremble with its tumult.
There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.
The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.
The Lord of hosts is with us;...
“Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.”
The Lord of hosts is with us; God is our refuge.*

As we face each day, may we take courage in knowing that the God of all creation has given us great wisdom and a promise to be our ever-present Lord. May we find hope in that truth!
Blessings!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rev. Robert A. Braudt". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R" and "B".

Rev. Robert A. Braudt

Much of the inspiration and content for the above letter can be attributed with the permission of Reverend Edrin C. Williams, Senior Pastor of the Sanctuary Covenant Church of Minneapolis.