

December 8, 2020

Dear Church Leaders and Family:

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged all of us in many ways—physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually. Regardless of our personal perspectives of the pandemic and its impact, I think we can agree that 2020 has been a year unlike any in our recent history. Thank you for your ministry to our communities during this difficult time.

I am writing to you as an Internal Medicine physician, Infectious Diseases specialist, and, most importantly, a fellow Seventh-day Adventist Christian. I am writing to you because I am worried. Despite the trials we have overcome, I fear that more are still ahead. The number of cases of COVID-19 continues to increase, and the number of deaths related to COVID-19 continues to rise (<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/>). Acute care visits, emergency department visits, and hospitalizations due to COVID-19 are now beginning to threaten hospitals' capacities to care for people with all health conditions; in light of this, my region's hospital leadership has united in a rare public call for the community's help (<https://nashvillegeneral.org/news/open-letter-all-tennesseans>). States are now adapting public health policy based on hospital and intensive care bed availability (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/03/us/california-stay-at-home-order.html>). Even amid these substantial challenges, local governments have affirmed that houses of worship are not bound by public health restrictions, and a Supreme Court ruling recently limited the government's ability to restrict religious gatherings, thereby protecting our right to worship as we so choose (https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/20pdf/20a87_4g15.pdf).

How do we move forward from here? Some churches have continued to host services with few changes, while other churches have closed or limited services based on public health guidance in their jurisdiction. In this unique and hopefully temporary time of crisis, I would encourage our church to rise to its historic role as a leader in health and become part of the collective solution to this public health challenge.

Paul addressed the church at Corinth about what was lawful and what was good. He wrote, "You say, 'I am allowed to do anything' —but not everything is good for you. You say, 'I am allowed to do anything' — but not everything is beneficial. Don't be concerned for your own good but for the good of others" (1 Corinthians 10:23-24). While the context is different, this message has meaning for us today. Yes, spiritual matters and ministries are of much greater importance than anything in this world. And yes, it can be frustrating when businesses and other secular institutions are guided by sometimes opaque and even conflicting guidance. However, **I ask local church leaders, rather than hosting church services and activities that may conflict with best public health practice, to care for the health of our church body and greater community by innovating our approach to ministry.** The Christian Medical and Dental Associations recently shared a plea for churches to cancel in-person gatherings at this time; I would encourage you to read this thoughtful post by Dr. Barrows and Dr. Hook (<https://cmda.org/a-plea-to-our-churches/>). I do recognize that some churches can operate safely following the best available public health guidance. To those that are too large or otherwise unable to adhere to best

practices, I ask local church leaders to voluntarily cancel large group gatherings, to offer access to services virtually or through other media, and to approach ministry in new ways.

Some may say that we must carry on even in the face of adversity. But, if we can help reduce the risk of physical pain and anguish of those around us, even if there is even a small chance of helping others by adjusting our regular routines, isn't it worthwhile? And while I am suggesting that we adapt our approach to ministry, I am not asking for our churches to stop loving and caring for one another. When Jesus spoke of the second coming, the faithful were not commended for meeting together physically and keeping church services open on a weekly basis. Instead, He said, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Matthew 25:35-36; NIV). There are great needs in our church and in the community all around us, and many needs have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is the time for which we have been called and for which we have been preparing. This is not the time for us to focus on ourselves, but for the church to rise and serve. Rather than worshipping in large groups, I would encourage the Church to show Christ to those in greatest need, whether they are within our own church families or in the wider community.

I do not know what the future may bring. I do not have some hidden truth or understanding. And I have no hidden agenda. I am hoping for each of us, our church community, and the wider world to be as safe and healthy as possible, allowing us to return to "normal" fellowship as soon as can be. I do know that this public health crisis has become a contentious one, a political-social wedge dividing many people, families, and communities. However, I hope that the Seventh-day Adventist Church can lead by example, by protecting our church and community while providing outreach to those in need, and ultimately advancing the kingdom of God. I respect that you must balance many factors in making decisions for your local church communities, and I pray for God's wisdom for each of you as you lead in ministry.

In Christ and with prayer,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C.A. Chastain', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Cody A. Chastain, MD, FACP, FIDSA

(The views and opinions in this letter are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the author's employer or of the intended audience.)