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Church canceled, Covid-19 tests people's faith

By **Brian Bushard**

I&M Staff Writer

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(March 19, 2020) This week, island churches started canceling Sunday services, opting instead to record and post them online as a way to maintain a community of faith following the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

It's taken about two weeks for the term "social distancing" to become household language, especially after Gov. Charlie Baker's move to put a temporary halt to all gatherings of more than 25 people.

"Some people are very isolated right now," Unitarian Universalist Meeting House Rev. Linda Simmons said. "I'm trying to be very present with them to let them know I love them and care for them without putting them at risk. I'm hoping we can find a safe way to love each other and care for each other."

"I see fear on one spectrum and compassion on another. We're trying to keep compassion alive as we negotiate the fear."

The Unitarian Sunday service was canceled last week. So were services at the First Congregational Church and the Methodist Church. The Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses canceled its Sunday service and meeting today.

St. Paul's Episcopal Church held a Sunday service, but it was the last one Father Max Wolf expects to hold for the immediate future. For now, prayers and hymns will be recorded and posted online.

It's the first time the church has ever suspended mass.

"We gather for worship as Christians have for 2,000 years and that gives comfort and strength to people," Wolf said. "We were reluctant to cancel, but it was the right decision."

“In the end, we’re people of faith. But now we’re asked to separate. For those who use technology, that helps, but I’m worried about older people who don’t know how to go online.”

Last week, St. Mary’s Catholic Church issued a dispensation from the obligation to attend mass, and closed its doors going forward.

Father John Kelleher said he will still lead regular masses, but behind locked doors with the service recorded and streamed online. Weddings, funerals and baptisms are still on for now, on the condition they are limited to 10 people or less.

“It’s not the same as being there but it’s still rewarding to follow the mass online,” Kelleher said.

Baker’s ban on public events in churches, gyms, theaters, and other public or private spaces, is effective through April 6. White House guidelines issued Monday now urge people to avoid gathering in groups of more than 10.

What that April 6 date leads into is Holy Week, the time Christians celebrate from Palm Sunday (April 5) to Easter (April 12). What will happen then will come over the next few days, Congregational Church minister Ruth Smalt said.

Smalt, president of the Nantucket Interfaith Council, is still deciding whether her church will hold Easter service. One option, she said, is to record the service and post it online.

The only in-person services the church is continuing in the meantime are counseling for crisis and end-of-life care, like final blessings at church or at home.

People want support from religious leaders, but during a pandemic, they should stay at home, she said.

“There’s been a lot of pastoral care by phone, email and text, checking in what do people need, praying together on the phone, virtually hug and hold hands and listening well, being the church responsibly and intelligently,” said Smalt, the assistant pastor at the First Congregational Church.

“We’re faithful to the commandments to care for one another. How that looks now is paying attention to trusted health and safety sources as we show love and care in new ways.”

Earlier this week, Simmons sent out a letter to her congregation earlier this week, reminding people to prepare for the virus and practice social distancing on top of good hygiene alone. Many people in her congregation live at home and many are over 60 years old, a demographic the CDC says is most at risk. Caution is essential, Simmons said, but so is faith.

“We are rightly being told not to panic but to prepare,” Simmons said in the letter. “At the same time, what we feel missing from the larger public conversation is any mention of the spiritual preparation required if we are to bring the best of our humanity to this shared health crisis.

“COVID-19 confronts us with some deeply theological questions about vulnerability and fear, individualism and interdependence, equity and compassion, and how we relate to our neighbors.”