

Church is essential. Gathering isn't.

As Christians, we understand the importance of in-person worship. As APNs, we know how serious COVID-19 is.

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We're both African American women, Christians, and advanced practice nurses with more than 20 years of experience. As Christians, we understand the vital role of support and community found within the walls of the church. However, as APNs, we also understand the science of this deadly coronavirus and the importance of containing the spread of COVID-19.

Church is the gathering of the faithful; it's not limited to the building or the way that people come together. Although some Christians are pushing to reopen churches to more familiar modes of gathering, doing so can put congregants at serious risk. It

can put Christians at odds with what Jesus calls the most important commandment: love of God and neighbor. During this season, sheltering in place can demonstrate our love for God and for humanity.

With so many of us spending most of our lives at home right now, we may be able to find time for reading, studying, and meditating on God's word while becoming more deeply rooted. We can spend time in prayer and journal about what we see and learn. We can find ways to bless and love our neighbors while maintaining distance, such as reaching out by phone or sending cards, making masks, or sending small gifts.

During this time, church leaders have to get creative to coordinate outreach efforts, but if everyone works together then no one has to do it alone. Black and brown communities in particular have been deeply impacted by the devastation of COVID-19. Historically, our faith and our gatherings have played a tremendous role in seeing us through dark times. The time of this pandemic is no different, but what we have done in the past is now being challenged and necessitates a change. The church is in a unique position to be a "light that can shine in darkness" (Matt. 5:14-16).

Church leaders are essential workers who can provide hope and support in communities of faith. However, doing so in the traditional way can create risks for themselves and the communities they serve. Finding alternative meaningful, creative, and engaging solutions to reach congregants is the task at hand. It is not so different from other monumental tasks our faith has come up against.

We don't intend to minimize the collective support, encouragement, power, and strength that result from the body of believers coming together in person. But as Ecclesiastes says, "there is a season for everything under the sun." With this in mind, we ought to see this as a time when we are called to be the church beyond the traditional walls of the church building—and to make an impact where we are by staying home and saving our most vulnerable people.

When the time comes to gather again, it will be important to follow the guidelines from health authorities on social distancing, face masks, and sanitation. In addition, we would suggest [limiting the number of people singing](#) to just a soloist, at a greater distance than six feet, since singing and loud talking have been shown to carry droplets further. Use prepackaged, disposable communion elements. Plan a phased

reintroduction to corporate worship that includes asking those who are most vulnerable to continue with virtual participation. And of course, ask those who are sick to please stay home.

Faith leaders are essential workers who are trusted sources of information. They can partner with health initiatives to disseminate information and [influence positive health outcomes](#). [COVID-19](#) is a health crisis that needs faith leaders to help shepherd those they serve.

There will be a time when we can meet together again safely, but the time is not now. We cannot make it easy for this virus to attack us by gathering together in large groups. We have to remain strategic in order to all come out better and stronger.