

Dear Friends,

I hope that this update finds you well on Holy Saturday in the season of COVID-19, 2020

I want to update you on the chaplaincy situation at LAC+USC Medical Center. Chaplains continue to be classified as essential workers at the medical center. Over the past month we have gone to great lengths to reconfigure resources to accommodate the anticipated surge of COVID-19 patients. This has included creating more ICU beds, canceling elective procedures, increasing hygiene requirements like frequency of hand washing, masks, etc., finding ways of working while keeping 6 feet apart and closing the hospital to visitors. It has been a season of rapid, constant change in policies and procedures at the hospital (as well as in the rest of life!). We continue to adapt to a new "normal" every day :-)

In order to conserve scarce resources like n95 masks, chaplains don't provide face to face routine support to patients who are hospitalized because of COVID-19. We do reach out by phone and offer prayer and spiritual support to those patients and their families. The exception to this is at end of life, when anointing or prayers for the dying are requested. In those moments, we gown, glove, mask, cap, and face shield up and draw near to the one who is dying, while one of their loved ones watches through the glass.

The intensity of the bedside visits with the non-COVID patients has increased, as they have no family/visitors that are allowed to see them. Naturally, many of them have heightened anxiety about being in the hospital during the pandemic. My spiritual support of hospital staff has also increased. Many of them are concerned about being exposed, infecting their young families and finances (with other family members now out of work). I am grateful for your prayers and support.

Yesterday was Good Friday. At the hospital, our observance of Good Friday is to enter into the suffering of Jesus on the day of his crucifixion. This year, COVID-19 saturated us all with a heightened awareness of the suffering of the human family.

I spent the morning in conversation with a patient¹ who is painfully frail after a long battle with her illness. She told me with genuine peace that she placed her struggle into God's hands. As a mother, she has planted the seeds of faith in her young children, so now her suffering isn't in her body - her suffering is her concern that her children will be angry with God because she has died. We prayed that God would nourish the seeds of faith in her children - that they would turn to God for comfort after she dies.

¹ This patient gave me permission to share her story.

I went from her bedside, to come along side of another patient² was slipping away from this life to the next. We got an exception to the “due to COVID no visitors allowed” policy so that his young family could come to his bedside to say good bye. They covered him with kisses and tears. Then together we made hand prints on parchment - first carefully pressing his big fatherly hands in the ink and onto the paper and then guiding their hands to make a their tiny handprint nested inside their father’s.

Even though he would be gone soon, their hands would forever be held in his. Just as my other patient places her children in God’s hands. Just as we wash our hands a thousand times a day to protect the ones in our care. Just as God reaches out to comfort us in our sorrow and suffering. Just as Christ extended his hands on the cross, to receive us all.

May you find the blessing you need in these uncharted times,
Rev. Elizabeth Gibbs Zehnder

– Rev. Elizabeth Gibbs Zehnder serves as Presbyterian staff chaplain at LAC+USC

Medical Center. Chaplaincy at LAC+USC Medical Center is a witness to God’s love for all people made possible by your support through Presbyteries of the Pacific, San Gabriel (thanks to San Marino Community Church), San Fernando and Los Ranchos and the Synod of Southern California. Your prayers and financial donations are always welcome. To find out how you can be involved, please contact Chaplain Elizabeth Gibbs Zehnder at Elizabeth.GibbsZehnder@gmail.com.

² I have changed details about this patient to protect their privacy.