

ILAG & SPAS: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT CORONAVIRUS & COVID-19

Updated March 12, 2020

As global concern about the Coronavirus & COVID-19 grows, we've been receiving inquiries from congregations and organizations planning on sending delegations to Guatemala or receiving guests from there in Minnesota. Here are the most frequently asked questions and responses:

Is it okay to travel?

Not at this time. On March 11 the U.S. Department of State issued a 'Global Level 3 Health Advisory,' requesting U.S. citizens to 'Reconsider Travel' abroad due to the global impact of COVID-19. As a result, **SPAS delegations and individuals planning visits in the next six weeks are advised to postpone their plans.** This position will be reviewed in early April. In the meantime, group leaders and travel delegations planning visits later in 2020 are advised to:

- **Remember that you are a guest.** To safeguard the wellbeing of their communities and ours, leaders in the ILAG and SPAS reserve the right to limit travel through this companion relationship. Delegations are expected to respect those decisions. Likewise, if your health is compromised (as an individual or as a community), we expect that you will voluntarily limit your travel so as not to cause harm to your hosts.
- **Stay up-to-date on current conditions.** As always, we ask travelers to regularly review and follow the recommendations coming from the U.S. Department of State and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Currently Guatemala is at Level 2 out of 4 with US citizens advised to 'Exercise Caution' due to crime. China, in comparison, is at a Level 4 ('Do Not Travel') due specifically to the Coronavirus.
 - <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/international-travel.html>
- **Consult your doctor and follow their advice.** According to the CDC, there are reported cases or a risk of community spread of COVID-19 in Guatemala. As with all international travel you'll want to consult with your medical provider and follow their recommendations accordingly, mindful of the remote nature of travel in Guatemala and limited medical infrastructure. This is especially true if you are part of a higher-risk group.
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/summary.html>

We're planning to travel later this year. Should we continue with, cancel, or postpone our plans?

Globally the situation is dynamic and changes on a daily basis. While each group leader and travel delegation will have their own level of risk tolerance, we are currently encouraging groups traveling to Guatemala this summer to proceed from a place of informed calm, mindful that things may change and plans may need to adjust.

- **Six weeks ahead of your trip** is a good target for a final decision. At that point all of your paperwork group travel funds should have been submitted to ILAG and the synod office, respectively. After that point funds are wired from Saint Paul to Guatemala and ILAG begins making final arrangements on your behalf.
- **Postponing** is not without its own challenges, most notably aligning group members' schedules. Groups opting to postpone are encouraged to make firm commitments to one another prior to doing so.
- **Payments & refunds.** Most expenses in Guatemala are paid for at the time of service; funds wired ahead for them can be fully refunded. Deposits and prepaid expenses, however, are not eligible for refund. Once payments have been disbursed they cannot be reclaimed. You'll want to check with your airline and/or travel agent for their terms and conditions as well.
- **Travel & MedEvac insurance** are strongly encouraged for all travelers going through ILAG-SPAS. You'll want to check with your insurance provider about the level of coverage provided should your trip be interrupted/cancelled or you should fall ill, be exposed to the virus, or require quarantine. Some carriers recommend adding 'Cancel for Any Reason' to your policy.
- **The ILAG-SPAS Travel Fee** of \$100 per person is good for 12 months and would be applicable if you postpone your travel. It cannot be refunded if canceled within six weeks of your planned departure date.

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We're planning to host guests later this year. What should we do?

Risk and transmission run both ways. In addition to the advice given for travelers listed above, those planning to receive guests should also consider the following:

- **As of today there are five confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Minnesota.** It is best to hold off on inviting guests here until local trends are established and patterns better understood. We are encouraging potential host organizations to wait until mid-April to review their options.
- **Host congregations**, as always, will want to have contingency plans and adequate travel/medical insurance in place in case guests experience flight disruptions/travel delays or should they fall ill, be exposed, or require quarantine.

What is the ELCA saying or doing about the Coronavirus and COVID-19?

As of March 1, international travel has been suspended for Chicago-based staff in the Global Mission unit through the end of the month. At the same time, deployed missionaries are requested to remain in their country of service. These travel restrictions will be reviewed in early April.

On March 6, Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton composed a pastoral message addressing concerns about COVID-19. In it she writes, "We are living in the time of the coronavirus... Many of our people are anxious. Luther's counsel, based on Scripture, is still sound. Respect the disease. Do not take unnecessary risks. Provide for the spiritual and physical needs of the neighbor. Make use of medical aid. Care for one another, especially the most vulnerable." The full text of her statement is available here: <https://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/8025>.