



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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STATEMENT FROM BISHOP THOMAS J. BICKERTON REGARDING THE OPENING OF UNITED METHODIST CHURCHES IN THE NEW YORK ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Today in his morning press conference, Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that another 105 New Yorkers died yesterday from the COVID-19 virus. Governor Ned Lamont announced yesterday that another 53 Connecticut residents died as well. In the last seven days alone, nearly 1,500 people who live within close proximity of our churches have died from this deadly virus. These facts alone reveal that we live in a region that cannot be compared with any other place in the country or world. What others are attempting to do in other regions would only result in increased infection, hardship and death if we were to try to do the same.

Two days ago, a team of leaders in our Annual Conference completed work and issued a twenty-six page document giving specific direction and instructions on how to prepare our church facilities and our people for the potential re-opening of our churches based on the metrics and guidelines provided by the State of New York and Connecticut, thorough and carefully crafted steps provided several weeks ago by the Centers for Disease Control, and additional measures set forth by my office.

In contrast to the above statements, today, the President of the United States announced that all churches would be declared “essential services” and gave them permission to open this weekend. This directive was given with no guidance for safety precautions, sanitation guidelines, or sensitivity to vulnerable age-groups, those with pre-existing conditions, or those who have been disproportionately affected due to poverty, systemic racism, or economic hardship.

I am writing to each of you, the clergy and lay leadership of the New York Annual Conference to clarify this situation with some clear guidance and direction from my office:

1. We will continue to live out of our theological understandings of the Christian faith as well as the principles of “doing no harm” to others, and our mission to provide safe places for all people to gather when the time is right.
2. **Our United Methodist churches will not be permitted to open this weekend.** Our churches have officially been closed until June 15th at the earliest and will open on a regional basis when advance preparation is done, certification is granted, and final permission is given by the District

Superintendent's office in consultation with my office.

3. Each church within the New York Annual Conference is still under specific direction from my office to begin work on completing the necessary steps for re-opening as provided in the document, **"New York Annual Conference Covid-19 Guidelines for Church Re-opening."** The detailed steps and guidance provided in this document will provide a safe and clear pathway for our churches to prepare for re-opening when the appropriate time comes. I will be hosting a webinar next Tuesday, May 26 at 10:00 a.m. for clergy and 5:00 p.m. for laity where more specific information will be shared. The link for the PDF file of those guidelines can be found here: <https://www.nyac.com/files/pdfs/nyac-covid-19-guidelines-for-church-reopening.pdf>.
4. This is not the time to find loopholes or detours for the guidance we have clearly provided. If you have any questions or concerns, I would be more than happy to address them with you through your District Superintendent. Please contact your Superintendent who will contact me with your concerns.

There are numerous examples across the country of houses of worship that rebelled against the advice of experts, decided to open their churches for worship, choir practice, or some other activity, and ended up infecting dozens of their parishioners as a result. We must act smartly, safely, and in cooperation with one another as we seek the right answers for how to re-open our churches. In the meantime, we ARE providing essential services that care for the well-being of our people through livestream, internet, and zoom technology in worship, study, reflection and counseling. Those essential services must be maintained as we respond to the needs of our people.

Finally, these are not days to be swayed by decisions that are made for political purposes. As Governor Cuomo has been fond of saying, this is not a time for red or blue politics. It is time for red, white, and blue collaboration. And, for us, this is not a time for independent Methodists to act unilaterally. It IS a time for UNITED Methodists in New York and Connecticut to pull together and send a clear message to each of our communities that we will exercise our "essential" services by first and foremost taking care of our people in mind, spirit, soul AND body.

I look forward to worshipping with many of you this weekend during your online worship experiences.

The Journey Continues, . . .



Thomas Bickerton
Resident Bishop

