



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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“So, if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, . . .”

Colossians 3:1-2

Dear Friends & Colleagues,

Grace and peace to each of you in the midst of this unusual, yet blessed Holy Week.

Even as I write, I am compelled to change some of my standard greetings. Normally, I write something like, “I pray that each of you are well and blessed.” I cannot write that today because I am fully aware that some of you are not well. I write today expressing concern for the growing number of pastors, spouses, and laity who have contracted the COVID-19 virus. Our prayers are extended to you, in particular, with a hope that you will find healing as quick as possible.

Today I write on the day after the largest single increase of death in New York and Connecticut. At this writing, nearly 6,000 people have died in our region. Every number represents a soul. With every number there is a grieving family or loved ones who need our intercession.

Still, there is word of hope on the horizon. The hospital admissions and ER admissions are dropping. The death rate is high today because the admission rate was much higher a week to ten days ago. With the admission rates dropping, we can anticipate that the death rate will soon plateau and begin to drop. And with those changing numbers, we edge closer to a day when this pandemic will run its course.

Yesterday, the Governor of New York extended the ban on gatherings of people until the end of April. The Governor of Connecticut has also continued his ban as well. These decisions continue the effort in our region to create appropriate social distancing so that the transmission of this virus is lessened. Now is not the time for any in-person gatherings. **For that reason, all of our churches in the New York Annual Conference will remain closed through April 30th.** As we near that date and receive more updated information, I will communicate with you what our plan will be moving forward.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of being smart and making wise decisions these next few weeks. The weather is getting nicer, cabin fever is increasing, and the temptation to get back to some sense of normalcy is growing. Governor Cuomo said this morning in his press conference, “It’s about ‘we,’ not ‘me.’” This is so true. Every risk you take potentially impacts another life. Every ill-advised decision you make potentially adds a greater burden on an already over-extended hospital worker. As the Governor has repeatedly said, *“Stay Disciplined. Stay Safe. Stay Smart. Stay at Home.”*

I also wanted to alert you to some ongoing developments that you should be aware of:

a) The Payback Protection Program (PPP)

I want to thank our Treasurer, Ross Williams for the excellent work he has done to make us all aware of the provisions and guidelines for this federal program. There has been an overload of applications which means that the competition for this program is fierce. Please do your research and make this application. It will provide a loan for payroll purposes that will not need to be paid back if the provisions are followed. This can be a real life-saver for some of our congregations, of which everyone is eligible. I encourage you to reach out to Ross at rwilliams@nyac.com should you have any questions on the program.

b) Financial Anxiety

I am fully aware of the financial burden these last 4-6 weeks has placed on our local churches. These are challenging times, especially when we think about what was and what will be. Our initial response has been to provide a two-month holiday on any pension and health care payments, but we realize that there will need to be more collaboration and partnership between our local churches and the Annual Conference moving forward. I simply wanted to acknowledge that I am aware of the struggle and urge you to take one day at a time and not make long-term decisions that might adversely affect your ministry moving forward. As I have said to our pastors, none of us is or should be on an island. We are a connectional church and now is the time more than ever to lean into the connection to find support and guidance.

c) Annual Conference

As you are aware, Annual Conference 2020 has been postponed until the fall. It is important to realize that even though we expect that the pandemic will flatten and drop before the regularly scheduled date of Annual Conference, we are unsure the extent to which large crowds will be permitted or encouraged. In addition, each of us will have plenty of work to do in order to restore the day to day ministry of the local church in order to re-establish and reinforce the relationships we hold so dear within them. As of today, we still do not have a firm date for the rescheduled 2020 Annual Conference. We are exploring all of our options which is taking some time to complete. You can, however, expect a very abbreviated session that will focus on the essential elements which will need approval. As soon as we know the dates, we will communicate them to you far in advance.

d) Move Day & Retirements

The cabinet has worked hard this season to lessen the impact of moves as much as possible. We have reduced the number of necessary moves this year by close to 50%. Still, with 431 churches under our care, there are situations that have demanded our attention. Those situations have created a series of moves that will impact local churches, pastors, and their families.

The cabinet is actively discussing when Move Day 2020 will take place. Until you hear otherwise, everyone should continue to anticipate July 1 as the official move date for all pastors. We are monitoring the current situation and will make any adjustments based on the information that we are given.

Pastors who are anticipating retirement will be retired on July 1st "ad interim" with final approval taking place at Annual Conference this fall.

Regardless, all churches facing moves need to focus on necessary and appropriate improvements to the parsonage, transition teams to provide support for the incoming pastor, and intentional events to say goodbye and hello to your pastor and her/his family if applicable.

e) Stress & Anxiety

There is no doubt that this pandemic has placed an increased burden on all of us. Whether you are in leadership within a congregation, a family member who is dealing with an infected loved one, or a person who is frightened by all of the events surrounding us, these are days that have evoked many different feelings and emotions. For some, a crisis emboldens and drives them into creativity and potential solutions to the problems we face. For others, a crisis creates confusion, anxiety and high stress. Regardless of the position you find yourself, I want to encourage you to be very intentional in the manner in which you take care of yourself. Time for proper rest, prayer, and reflection is important. Time

to remove yourself from the constant media coverage and engage in some other activity will help. And, for the sake of this conversation, seeking the support and assistance from another voice is critical. Whether it is engaging in a virtual counseling session or simply asking a friend or colleague for some time just to “unload,” please take care of yourselves. As stress and anxiety rise, so do frayed emotions that often lead to poor decisions that potentially cause unintended harm. Let us be careful with ourselves so that we can exercise great care with one another.

f) Transparency and Good Communication

I pledge to you that I will continue to provide you with regular updates and do my best, with the help of my cabinet and our conference staff, to provide you with clear and transparent communication. We ask the same of you. We want to join you in prayer for those in your midst who are hurting. We want to intercede to provide assistance and support in situations that have become difficult to navigate. We want to project a realistic but hopeful vision for our future as we walk into this “new normal” as a church. It will require good communication from you and from us. Let’s do our best in this regard.

g) Easter Blessings

In my Easter Sermon that will be broadcast across the Annual Conference this weekend, I say that this has been a strange Lenten Season. A most unusual Holy Week. A less than majestic Easter. If anything, this Lenten Season has been a forty-day Good Friday with pain, heartache, and death happening all around us. We haven’t needed a Good Friday service. We’ve been living it every day recently.

But thanks be to God that we are not a Good Friday people. We are an Easter People -- a people that believe in resurrected life, a people that believe that hope was offered to us eternally when Christ rose from the dead. We celebrate life and know that suffering and death is not the end of the story. There is yet another chapter that includes the glorious conclusion that we are claimed, called, and loved by our God. This is the heart of the Easter story and it is, by faith, that which will see us through these challenging days.

This IS the Good News of Easter and the Good News of our faith.

In her resource book entitled, Bread for the Journey, Ruth C. Duck offers these words as an Easter benediction. I share them with you as an Easter “Call to Worship” and an Easter “ Call to Action”:

Now that you have heard the good news, what will you do?
We will go out into the world, showing by our lives that Christ is risen indeed!
Praise God! How will you do this?
We will tell the story of God’s love for the world in Jesus Christ, and we will continue Christ’s loving act among humanity.
Alleluia! Praise God! Christ is risen indeed!
Amen!

Let us resolve today that we WILL BE Easter people who raise our hopeful voices to a broken world.

May it be so. May it be so.

The Journey Continues, . . .

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thomas Bickerton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the left.

