



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become servants to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Galatians 5: 13-14 (NRSV)

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

Yesterday I opened my mail to find a "prayer square" sent to me by a friend in Ohio. This is the fourth "prayer square" or "pocket prayer shawl" I have received in the last couple of weeks. This kind and wonderful gesture encourages the recipient to hold the piece of cloth in their hand or place it in their pocket as a reminder to trust in God's grace in times of need. With the news of my father's infection from the Coronavirus, as well as the steady number of reports flowing into my office of others who are infected, these gentle reminders of the ties that bind us together in loving devotion and prayer mean so very much.

Even though there is not a prayer shawl attached with this latest update, there *is* attached a sincere prayer and a genuine concern for each of you. You remain in my prayers each day and, as the Apostle Paul said, *"I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy."* (2 Timothy 1:4)

The news filling the air waves is providing words of encouragement about the flattening of the curve of this virus. Hospital admissions, intubations, and death rates are dropping. Yet, the news is also filled with emerging anxieties. Mental health difficulties, cabin fever, economic struggles, and questions of when to re-open are now growing. Adding to the struggle is the reality that different regions of the country are responding in different ways based on their context.

Here is the latest update from my office:

1. Churches in the New York Annual Conference will Remain Closed.

We will continue to take our lead from the decisions made by our state government officials.

Governor Cuomo of New York has extended his stay at home order until May 15th. Governor Lamont of Connecticut has extended his until May 20th. **For that reason, our churches will remain closed through May 24th at the earliest.** I know that this is difficult. But we must stay the course and continue to remain focused. We all will be tempted by reports coming from other parts of the country where restrictions will be significantly reduced and eliminated.

But please remember, there is no place in the country that has faced more illness and death than

our region. For example, over 95% of all the cases in New York are found within the bounds of our Annual Conference. The containment strategies put in place are for our protection. We also must remember that, for the most part, our local church constituency base is populated by the people most vulnerable to this infection. We will evaluate our next steps moving forward once we receive direction from these officials but, for now, we will remain closed.

2. **Be Mindful of Grief, Anxiety, and Self-care**

These are days that demand much from everyone in leadership, both lay and clergy alike. Much of what is being asked of us is a part of our own personal “new norm.” Many of us have never experienced or been asked to lead in the midst of such times

On a normal day, when a person loses a loved one to death, grief can be consuming. But in the midst of days when proper goodbyes and respectful funeral services are not possible, grief can be overwhelming—not only for the loved ones involved but also for the ones called of God to provide pastoral care.

These are tender times, ones that will demand days of hard work. But they are days that will also demand times of intentional self-care. Read the scriptures. Dive into daily devotions. Remain in touch with your need for a spiritual friend or colleague to talk with. Take care of yourself even as you are caring for others.

3. **Begin Planning for What's Next**

It is my prayer that we will be re-opening our churches in the not too distant future. But until then, we have the gift of being able to begin imagining what that day will be like. We can also begin working for that day with intentional planning. Over the last few days I have read two articles about those plans.

In this letter I want to adapt for our context an article by Ken Braddy entitled, “*24 Questions Your Church Should Answer Before People Return.*” In the article, Braddy provides some excellent things to ponder as you begin planning for the day when we will re-open our churches for public gatherings.

Here are some suggestions I would commend to you in your discernment:

- ***Plan for multiple services***

If our churches are limited in the number of people who can gather, even churches that worship less than one hundred may need to begin thinking about multiple services during the course of a day in order to provide proper social distancing.

- ***Plan to continue live streaming***

It would be a tragic mistake if any of our churches ceased having virtual worship once we are allowed to reassemble in person. This opportunity is providing us with an insight into 21st century evangelism and is revealing the needs that people have for hope and meaning in their lives. Make plans now to invest in the kind of equipment that will help you go to the next level in this ministry.

- ***Rethink how you receive an offering***

In this new normal of virtual worship, every one of our churches is going to have to think about compelling ways for people to give. Before the virus we were worrying about the sustainability of many of our churches. That has increased due to the pandemic. Online giving must become a part of our future. And, besides that, given social distancing and fears of a resurgence, passing

the plate in a worship service may not be the best way to collect an offering in person moving forward.

- ***Begin thinking now about how things like Vacation Bible School and ongoing Sunday School & Children's Church may need to be altered for this season.***
- ***What are you doing now to sanitize and sterilize your church building?***
Now is the time to be doing these important functions.
- ***If social distancing regulations are recommended, how will you deal with things like "Passing the Peace," Greeters, and creating an atmosphere that is respectful but also welcoming?***

These kinds of issues and more are discussed in depth in the two articles below:

- [24 Questions Your Church Should Answer Before People Return](#)
- [7 Shifts Churches Need to Make Because of the Coronavirus](#)

4. Continue to Live into our Principles

In his daily press conference, Governor Andrew Cuomo says that our first rule should be to "Do No Harm." We've heard that before, haven't we? In fact, it comes directly out of our own history. But there is more. We are not only to "do no harm," our Wesleyan roots also direct us to "do good," and "stay in love with God."

Please remember, this is not a time for "me," it is a time for "we." As Galatians states, "*do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become servants to one another.*" Don't use your freedom to harm someone else. Don't take a chance or make decisions that may have negative impacts on the people you serve. Continue to create opportunities for high touch with no touch. Remember that there are 430 other churches in the New York Annual Conference besides yours who are trying their best to be faithful as well.

Pray for one another. Intercede for one another. And above all else, love one another.

In her wonderful book, *Out of the Ordinary: Prayers, Poems, and Reflections for Every Season*, Joyce Rupp shares this wonderful poem, entitled "Blessing Prayer for Healing:"

May you desire to be healed.

May what is wounded in your life be restored to good health.

May you be receptive to the ways in which healing needs to happen

May you take good care of yourself.

May you extend compassion to all that hurts within your body, mind, spirit.

May you be patient with the time it takes to heal.

May you be aware of the wonders of your body, mind, and spirit and their amazing capacity to heal.

May the skills of all those who are caring for you be used to the best of their ability in returning you to good health.

May you be open to receive from those who extend kindness, care, and compassion to you.

May you rest peacefully under the sheltering wings of divine love, trusting in this gracious presence.

May you find little moments of beauty and joy to sustain you.

May you keep hope in your heart.

This is my prayer for you and for all the people you faithfully serve. I pray it today, for you, holding a pocket prayer shawl from someone who cares.

The Journey Continues, . . .



Thomas Bickerton
Resident Bishop

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