



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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May 8, 2020

Dear Friends & Colleagues,

Grace and peace to each of you. I pray that this latest update finds you blessed and centered on the grace of God available to us all.

As we continue working our way through this pandemic, there are some clear realities still very much in play around us. The level of pain and death all around us is sobering. When you look at maps and projections, it is clear that we are at the epicenter. Within our context of life and ministry, we have to deal with the magnitude of this virus on a scale found nowhere else on planet earth. It has affected our families, friends, and local churches. It has highlighted injustices, people on the margins, and revealed the depth of systemic racism that has lessened the importance of certain individuals at the expense of the privileged who maintain control and power-- whether it is found in the safety of our homes or in the ability to stockpile food or to have access to services to keep us healthy.

Some days it seems like too much. And yet, there are inspiring stories of determination and hope that give us reason to believe that God is at work in and through us to truly make a difference in the people we are called to serve.

Getting Back to “Normal”

One of the realities we are facing is that we are beginning to enter another phase in this pandemic. It is a phase that you can see emerging across the country related to, “*When can we get back to normal?*” It’s a phase where tensions and anxieties and outbursts are beginning to happen on the steps of state capitols and in the living rooms of our homes. Whether it’s the desperate need for a paycheck or the simple reality of cabin fever, some days it seems like it’s too much to handle and the outbursts appear to be more about our anxiety than it is about the particular issue being raised.

I truly worry about us in this next phase, especially as it related to our mental health and our spiritual well-being. I worry about us falling into the trap of unnecessarily focusing on things that are minor in the midst of this big major that we are dealing with. I worry about doing harm through the words we inappropriately speak or the actions that we don’t intend to do but can’t find a way to avoid because we

are smothered by emotions and anxieties about our world and our lives being turned upside down.

It reminds me of the dilemma Paul described in Romans 7: *“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”* (Romans 7” 15, 18-19)

It is so important for us, in this vulnerable time, to breathe, think before we speak, be in touch with our inner drivers, and set as an intentional pattern the need to be careful with one another each moment of the day.

A Time for Self-Care & a Weekend of Sabbath

I want to remind each of you to take good care of yourselves. If you are having a tough time, confide in a friend or a therapist. If you don't know where to turn, reach out to us and we'll help you find the assistance you need. And, remember to find time for quiet reflection, solitude, prayer and reading. Think twice about your reactions and over-reactions. Just breathe.

As you are aware, our Annual Conference session has been postponed until this fall. We are still working out the details of this much abbreviated session and will let you know about the dates and plans as soon as we know.

But the postponement of Annual Conference gives us a window for the renewal and rest I have been talking about. Our Annual Conference was scheduled for Thursday, June 11 – Sunday, June 14. Those are dates that should already be marked on your calendar, dates when pastors were already expected to be away from their pulpits and away from their day-to-day activities.

I am announcing today that the dates originally scheduled for Annual Conference, Thursday-Sunday, June 11-14 are being set aside for a period of pastoral respite and renewal. I am asking for local churches to support their pastors taking these four days for rest, renewal and reflection. Our Conference staff will be organizing an online worship service on that Sunday, June 14, to be made available as a substitute for every worship service across the conference so that our pastors and their worship teams can have a break from their preparation on that Sunday.

There is much being asked of all of us. I pray that we can be supportive of this need to provide our leaders with an intentional time of rest and that our leaders can take advantage of this opportunity.

Remaining Centered on our Values

One of the things that I frequently celebrate is being able to claim my faith as a United Methodist Christian. The combination of the gospel message and directives of Jesus to love God and love neighbor with the unique features of our Wesleyan understanding of faith based on Personal Holiness & Social Holiness, as well as the directive to do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God, and the core

principles of Saving Grace, Justifying Grace, and Sanctifying Grace; these cause me to celebrate how I have been formed and am being formed into the likeness of Christ every day.

- When I walk outside and witness the beauty of God's creation emerging in the springtime, as a United Methodist Christian I immediately begin to think about our emphasis on the stewardship of creation and need to care for the earth that God has provided.
- When I read the paper or listen to the news and hear about how the people on the margins--, the immigrant, the vulnerable in the nursing homes, the people victimized by systemic racism-- and others who are suffering greatly from the effects of the Coronavirus, I immediately begin to draw upon my Methodist upbringing and our emphasis to be involved in transmitting the gospel through acts of social justice, dismantling racism, and care for the poor.
- When I look at a communion chalice or a baptismal font, I immediately begin to celebrate a Methodist theology of acceptance, inclusion, and welcome for everyone to join us at the table and on the journey toward Christ-like holiness.
- When I see an offering plate, I immediately begin to draw upon a faith that says that for those who have been given much, much is required. That tithing and faithful giving, even in the midst of hardship and uncertainty, will be blessed by God.
- And when I stand in a pulpit, I immediately begin to focus on the opportunity to transmit the word of God in some way that will create a spark, light a fire, or cause someone to find hope and joy as we evangelize the world for Christ.

Those are the values we hold dear as United Methodist Christians and they are the values that will continue to inform every decision we make moving forward in the midst of this pandemic. We cannot do anything less than that.

Specific Actions Moving Forward

That leads me to some specifics related to where we are and where we are going as an Annual Conference.

As you know and as you feel, the questions about when to re-open our churches is a burning question. As I have stated before, we are going to take our lead from the state governments in New York and Connecticut. In those governments there are game plans being developed for a gradual re-opening based on the fulfillment of certain criteria. We will comply and follow those guidelines completely. Here are some specifics:

- a. **Our churches will remain closed through at least the end of May.**
- b. **We are in the process of working with the governments guidelines to create our own plan for potential re-opening.**
 - i. We do not have a specific date set for a re-opening.
 - ii. We are in a very unique situation. We are not Florida or Georgia. We will plan according to the extremities of our context.

- iii. Our plan is to do a phased in approach depending on the region, very much like what is being planned in NY & CT.
- iv. We are currently working on guidelines and protocols for each of our churches to follow on how to re-open when the time comes. Those will be in your hands in the next week or so once they are completed.
- v. We know that it is important to you, as it is to us, to re-gather at some point in our local churches. But we will only do so at the appropriate time with the strict guidelines for cleaning, social distancing, and smart strategies. We have to remember that a large portion of our membership falls into the category of the most vulnerable. We also know that some of the biggest spikes of the virus and some of the biggest indiscretions of in-person gatherings have happened in churches.
- vi. Most of all, we will draw upon our values through it all:
 - 1. We will not do harm to others.
 - 2. We will act smartly but lean heavily on our faith that God will guide our paths and see us through.
 - 3. We will love deeply, even if it means further sacrifices.

As a result of the major impact on our region due to the Coronavirus, there are several announcements I am making:

1. **Move Day**

Normally our move day for pastors is July 1. We have greatly reduced the number of moves this season by nearly 50%. Still, churches have vacancies and they are filled by our itinerant system and process. But, since our churches have been closed for some time and will need to be re-started and re-focused at the appropriate time, **I am moving move day from July 1 to August 1** to give pastors in their current settings a chance to get the church back on its feet before leaving. Churches will need to prepare to receive their new pastors and pastors moving will need to make plans for their transition on August 1.

2. **Retirements**

Retired pastors are being asked to remain in place as well during that interim period. Since Annual Conference is begin delayed, retired pastors will be officially retired *AD INTERIM* on August 1 so that they may begin to receive their pensions at the appropriate time. They will then be officially retired when the Annual Conference convenes this fall.

3. **UMCOR/Impact Grants**

Through the generosity of UMCOR, the NEJ Multi-ethnic Center, a re-allocation of Annual Conference funds, and the UM City Society, we are preparing to make significant contributions to feeding and outreach ministries of local churches in parts of our Annual

Conference where ethnic and racial minority and other vulnerable populations are being disproportionately affected by the coronavirus. We are currently working to organize these grants and will be making distributions to identified areas/programs within the next 7-10 days.

4. **Technology Grants**

We are continuing to develop online training and webinars on how to improve online worship, zoom meetings, and other ministries that are being developed in the “new normal.” A redistribution of our funds is being made to provide grants in order to continue to grow our outreach and to make deeper connections with the people we are now reaching through livestream and other internet technologies. We need to be planning for this form of outreach and evangelism to continue long after we have permission to regather in person. Guidelines are being developed regarding the parameters around how these grants can be secured.

5. **Re-Imagining NYAC**

I am forming a Re-Imagining NYAC Task Force of laity and clergy to help us think through what we have learned from these past few months and what we need to set in place as a re-imagined Annual Conference. I pray that this will be a very open and engaging conversation about how we must adapt many of the norms and protocols of our ministry as a result of the pandemic and its life-changing and culture-changing impact.

What all of this means is that in some areas we are moving quickly (outreach and intentional caring ministries) while in other areas we are moving slowly and methodically (re-opening and intentional steps to take extreme care for how we re-enter once again) in others.

In the midst of it all I urge you to: breathe, remember our values, treat each other with grace and patience, and in every situation you face, especially in the places where you are tempted to react in ways that may do harm to others by the words you say/actions you take, demonstrate your deep love for God and for one.

In his unique book, [Guerillas of Grace](#), Ted Loder writes:

*O God, complete the work you have begun in me.
Release through me*

- *A flow of mercy and gentleness that will bring:*
- *Water where there is desert,*
- *Healing where there is hurt,*
- *Peace where there is violence,*
- *Beauty where there is ugliness,*

- *Justice where there is brokenness,*
- *Beginnings where there are dead-ends.*

Waken in me

- *Gratitude for my life,*
- *Love for every living thing,*
- *Joy in what is human and holy,*
- *Praise for you.*

Renew my faith that you are God

- *Beyond my grasp but within my reach;*
- *Past my knowing but within my searching;*
- *Disturber of the assured, assurer of the disturbed;*
- *Destroyer of illusions, creator of dreams;*
- *Source of silence and music, community and solitude, light and darkness, death and life.*

O Keeper of Promises, composer of grace

Grant me

- *Glee in my blood,*
- *Prayer in my heart,*
- *Trust at my core,*
- *Songs for my journey,*
- *And a sense of your kingdom.*

I like that. Glee in our blood. Prayer in our hearts. Trust at our core. Songs for our journey. And a clear sense of God's kingdom.

That is my prayer for you.

Be well. Stay healthy. And know that you are loved.

The Journey Continues, . . .

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Thomas Bickerton". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned at the bottom of the page.

Thomas Bickerton
Resident Bishop

Watch The State of the NYAC on Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/NYACUMC/>

Poem take from: Loder, Ted, Guerrillas of Grace, 1984, Innisfree Press, Inc., Philadelphia, PA.



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