

For the Love of God,

STAY AT HOME

WEAR A MASK

KEEP PHYSICAL DISTANCE

BUT *DON'T* HUNKER DOWN



A sign outside a business in Rosalyn, Wash.

Yesterday was the six month anniversary of my first pastoral notice regarding COVID-19. We didn't know much about the coronavirus and the pandemic it would cause on February 27. We didn't know we would celebrate Easter online. That General Conference in May would be postponed, Annual Conferences in June cancelled, Jurisdictional Conference in July. We couldn't imagine movie theaters closing. Restaurants open only for take-out. Loved ones being isolated from visits in hospitals or nursing homes. We didn't imagine that we would pass spring and summer and enter fall with restrictions on social gathering, travel, economic activity and schools. We find ourselves in a wilderness. The bible knows what wandering in the wilderness is like. The bible is full of stories, laments, encouragements, admonitions, guidelines for people who, from time to time find themselves wandering, discouraged, uncertain, lost. So, people of God, listen up. God has not abandoned us.

DON'T STOP LOVING YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

– John 15: 12-13

Sacrifice personal liberty to save lives

To save lives, prevent long term health effects, slow the spread of COVID-19, and to promote long term, sustainable economic recovery, United Methodists in the Greater Northwest will continue to praise God and serve their communities under the provisions of [Reimagining Life Together](#) for the foreseeable future.

The risk from the coronavirus isn’t behind us. While the spread of the disease is declining in some areas, it is increasing in others, as waves of community spread carry it into previously untouched rural communities and some experts predict new spikes this fall in areas where schools and other social gatherings restart in person, and as temperatures drop, people move indoors and another cold and flu season begins.

At the same time, an “increasing numbness to the virus’s danger”^[i] means that our collective sense of risk is abating and leading to careless behavior that promotes spread of the disease. This is a predictable, natural occurrence: “The more we’re exposed to a given threat, the less intimidating it seems.... Because risk perception fails as we learn to live with COVID-19,...researchers...see... strict social distancing, enforced masking outside the home and stay-at-home orders as perhaps the only things that can protect us from our own faulty judgment....Our tendency to view risk through the prism of emotion... hurts us during a pandemic.”

This numbing to the reality of risk has combined with an emphasis on individual rights to fuel rebellion by some against restrictions on social gathering, refusal to wear face coverings and calls for removal of public officials who advocate such measures. Individual liberties activists even carry guns to protests and to government offices to make their point.

Developing tolerance to risk is a good coping strategy if you have a crippling fear of heights or crowds or closed spaces. It is dangerous if it results in risky behavior that causes more community spread of a virus that leads to further spikes in cases, hospitalizations and deaths.

Ask yourself, **WHAT WOULD JESUS DO?** Wash your hands with soap or hand sanitizer. Stay at home as much as you can. Wear face coverings in public. Keep socially distant. Don’t gather in large groups. And be gracious about it! *Do not look dismal* (Matthew 6: 16). These are small, life-saving sacrifices in the face of a pandemic that has killed 180,000 people in the United States and is far from finished. Think of them as acts of love for God, self and neighbor.

As you encounter other people on the street or in the grocery store, whether or not their faces are covered, let your eyes meet their eyes, as an affirmation that you *see* them, maybe say at least

“hello” and offer a silent prayer: “May God bless and keep you.” This is how Christians behave as they try to obey God’s reverence for life.

Deepen Relationships of Spiritual Depth and Care

The pandemic poses risks besides those from infection by the coronavirus. Long term social isolation and anxiety are dangers to mental, spiritual and social health. We hear reports of increased domestic abuse, crime, substance abuse, depression and other mental illnesses. Job loss and economic instability put strains on individuals, families and communities.

Most of our churches have adapted very quickly to provide ways for the community to gather remotely – online, drive-in, distanced outdoor, on the phone, by sending written sermons and bulletins. Some have activated telephone trees. It’s been amazing.

In addition to group gatherings, as we move into autumn and winter, how will our churches foster networks of human connection for as long as distance and isolation continue? What is our long-term plan to encourage relationships of spiritual companionship, encouragement and prayer among people who may have limited social networks? How do we ensure that no-one in our communities of care are left without human contact day by day and week by week?

Could we develop networks of Companions on the Journey (COJ), who commit to keep in weekly touch with each other, and to be available to one another as needed between scheduled contacts? Might a team of people in a congregation search out lines of powerful, prophetic scripture, hymns, poetry, prayers, to post on the church website or Facebook page to feed the spirits of people.

LOVE GOD WITH HEART, SOUL, MIND, STRENGTH

Don’t Hunker Down Spiritually

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves...groan inwardly while we wait.... The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.
– Romans 8:22-26

To combat declining mental, emotional and spiritual health experienced by many during the COVID-19 pandemic, I call United Methodists to return to the deep well of God’s love and grace, revealed in Jesus Christ, as we remember, refresh and reclaim the spiritual strength and courage of our faith preserved in the scriptures, hymns, prayers, teachings, and practices of our Church. And I call on new generations to lead us into new expressions and practices that have the power to bless people in this pandemic with fortitude and resilience.

Nothing is the same in our churches since COVID-19 first forced us to “hunker down” with stay at home orders in March and April and I asked the churches of the Greater Northwest Area

(Alaska, Oregon-Idaho and Pacific Northwest Conference) to suspend worship and close their buildings beginning March 13. No handshakes, no communion, no friendship circles, no laying on of hands, [no sardines](#), no passing of the peace, no singing, no meetings, no potlucks, no coffee hour, no hospital visits, home visits, prayer circles, child care, food banks, AA meetings.

I hear from some of our churches an urgency to gather again in person, in the sanctuary, in our familiar pews, to sing our beloved songs as if our Christian love for one another would wither and die without its familiar forms — as if God isn't present except when the community is gathered. As if we cannot support one another without physical proximity. As if even one of the breaths we take is not filled with the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit. Our dependence on sensory signs creates in us a tendency to hunker down and wait until we can celebrate in the ways we are used to finding comfort in.

The United Methodist Church has worked very hard to embody the love of God in our gatherings for worship, study and fellowship, in our volunteer service, advocating for just public policy, providing meals, welcoming new immigrants, caring for families. We have a strong focus on faith in the flesh, faith at work in the world that you can see, hear, smell, taste and touch. We believe that faith was alive in the physical presence of Jesus as he walked through villages, touched and healed the sick, restored sight to the blind, called forth demons, shared the bread and wind in the Upper Room and a breakfast of fish. And we believe our faith has concrete physical expressions. *“Faith without works is dead” (James 2:17)*. And yet, beneath or behind the world of our senses, there is another reality. The bible calls it the world of “unseen things.”[\[iii\]](#) Outward facing faith need to be balanced with a theology of spirit that affirms that there is more to faith than what we can see, touch, taste, hear and smell. There is also an inwardness to faith. Beneath all sensory evidence, our hearts are touched by God in experiences so immediate and powerful that they cannot be dismissed.

We must grow deeper roots. We must not settle for a faith that lets us down when times are tough and the way is hidden in shadows. The Christian Church must strive to be a beacon of hope in the very darkest of times. When we can see no evidence of God's redeeming grace whatsoever, the “eye of our heart” sees what is not seen. When no encouraging word is to be heard, the Holy Spirit speaks to our inner being. *When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit [of God] bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, of God and joint heirs with Christ.* (From Romans 8: 15-17).

When you read in the bible about light, dawn, lamp, fire, radiance, sun, it's talking about the way God opens our eyes and enlightens us to see the things of the spirit that cannot be seen.

- *Open my eyes that I might see...*
- *Open the eyes of my heart, Lord...*
- *Ye blind, behold your savior come...*
- *Be Thou my vision, O lord of my heart...*
- *Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path...*

Some of us have read and sung these words our whole lives. Now is the time to call them forth, and shine them into the dark days of disease, isolation, fear and division. We learned them for a time like this.

My faith is not dependent on in-person gathering, on the elements of communion and baptism, on the laying on of hands, or the kiss of peace. I love all of these, and they enrich my faith, and they certainly help keep my participation in the community of faith alive and immediate. But, in the midst of a pandemic, sitting at my desk in the corner of my isolated bedroom as I write, God lives in me, speaks to me, gives me hope, cajoles me to action, quickens my heart. *“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1)*

In the year ahead I promise to lead the Greater Northwest Area to invite its members and friends to broaden and deepen their spiritual lives, not in a way that turns us inward, away from our communities and the world, but in a way that strengthens our hearts with courage to engage with our families, neighbors and strangers during times when evidence of God’s presence and goodness are scarce.

*By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will shine upon us,
To give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
To guide our feet into the way of peace.*
– Luke 1: 78-79



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