



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Dakotas-Minnesota Area

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Grace and peace to you in the name of our risen Lord.

Many of you are in the process of creating or implementing plans to return to in-person worship. I encourage care and pray as you return to a new form of in-person worship in a gradual manner.

The governors of North and South Dakota, as well as the Centers for Disease Control, encourage each of us to take responsibility to stop the spread of the virus. There continue to be confirmed COVID-19 cases, and each time we gather, we risk contracting this virus.

The continuation of virtual worship opportunities is essential for many of our people, who may be among the vulnerable populations or crucial servants to our most vulnerable. I call for each and every congregation gathering to continue to reach out in creative ways by worshipping outdoors, holding multiple gathering times to accommodate fewer numbers gathering at one time, and practicing social distancing any time we gather.

Coronavirus infections and deaths continue. In some locations, we have not yet hit our peak, in other places, we will see a second wave. National calls for all churches to open their doors do not account for the fact that what is safe differs from state to state and community to community. These calls for re-opening also seem to forget that churches have remained open throughout the pandemic. Our buildings might be closed, but churches have never been buildings—churches are followers of Jesus who embody his teachings and share God's love throughout the world. And that's precisely what we are doing as we worship, gather over screens, serve our communities, and further Christ's mission in ways that keep people healthy and safe.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to be leaders in caring for those who are most vulnerable. We are called to love our neighbors and to act for the good of the whole. We are called to heal a broken world. Right now, I believe that means mitigating the spread of coronavirus by staying the course, worshiping online, and with caution, gradually returning to in-person gatherings. For this reason, I continue to lift up the guidance that was issued on April 29. We continue to provide COVID updates and resources on the conference website.

Infectious disease experts, the Centers for Disease Control, and the North and South Department of Health have all indicated that outdoor worship is much safer and poses considerably less risk than indoor gatherings. So I strongly recommend gathering this way



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over the summer. It is my understanding and belief that it is safe to gather outdoors a reasonably larger group of people—but only if strict social distancing is maintained, and attendees wear masks. It is also recommended, if you gather indoors, that you limit attendance to a safe percentage of a church's building capacity to allow for social distancing. I want to urge you to keep your numbers smaller out of an over-abundance of caution.

One thing that has become clear in recent weeks is that this is a fast-moving pandemic that requires a rapidly changing response. As new recommendations and best practices come to light, we will update you.

As Gov. Doug Burgum of North Dakota recently said in a press conference, "This is a battle we are fighting together. I would ask people to dial up your empathy and understanding. This is not a disease that spreads risk equally."

Thank you for your partnership, your innovation, and your commitment to care for the spiritual, physical, and mental health of all of God's people.

Let us remember as we continue to navigate this uncharted territory that God is with us.

In Christ's love,

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Bishop Bruce R. Ough
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