



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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Dear Members and Friends of the Desert Southwest Conference,

WITH DEEP THANKSGIVING . . . I start this update with a word of thanksgiving for the courage of our laity and clergy in the face of a very difficult situation. As people of faith, we are taught to know the love of Jesus lived out in the community of the body of Christ, the Church. Since the onslaught of the Coronavirus, our churches have demonstrated extraordinary courage and compassion. Acknowledging the threat to our congregations, you ceased activities of our church life, most especially in-person worship. These activities form the very basis of our existence as the Church and I know how difficult and painful this has been. Yet, you did so as a means of saving lives and flattening the curve of a new disease about which we are still learning.

Acknowledging that this has not been an easy time, I affirm your willingness to be a part of the solution, not of the problem as we strive for unity against the spread of the Coronavirus. Remembering that ministry is not confined to the walls of the church, I also again and again affirm the positive learnings and experiments you have engaged in to enable you to offer the grace of Jesus Christ in new ways.

Now, due in part to our efforts of prayer, of wearing masks, maintaining social distancing, observing strict hygiene practices and the suspension of in-person worship and gatherings, we are beginning to see a slow improvement in the number of deaths and positive cases.

AN ENCOURAGEMENT . . . While we wait for the moment when we can meet the benchmarks for entering Phase 1 of the DSC Ministry in the Season of COVID and Beyond (download [here](#)), I encourage you to continue to engage in safe practices that have demonstrated effectiveness in controlling the spread of the virus. **While the continuing presence of COVID-19 in Nevada and Arizona make it important that we continue our suspension of in-person worship and other gatherings, there are exceptions being allowed for a variety of reasons.**

FORWARD MOVEMENT . . . Because I know it has been very difficult for our laity and clergy to not be able to meet in person, and because I know that in specific locations, the threat of contracting COVID-19 is lower than in other places, you may be interested in these new exceptions even as we wait for the time when we can all resume ministry in-person. If you would like to pursue any of these options, I ask that you submit your plan and covenant for re-opening which should have been created along with a team of leaders from your congregation. Your church's plan and covenant should be submitted to your District Superintendent who I am asking to work with you and your team. On a case-by-case basis, your District Superintendent, in consultation with the DSC Covid-19 Response Team will review and may approve your local church plan for:

1. Small groups of no more than 10 gathering at churches for purposes of ministry including, but not limited to memorial services, Bible studies, support groups, and recording or live-streaming of worship.
2. Outdoor worship in locations where the rate of COVID infection has been low for 14 days. District Superintendents have suggestions for websites that you might use for this information. If you have a trusted source of statistical information that you would like to share, I would welcome your input!

Drive in worship following stringent precautions detailed in a plan. (See examples in #4 in “Resources” below.)

AN INVITATION TO YOU . . . These are just a few of the possibilities we might engage in even now. I invite you to use your creativity to design additional ways of ministering. Share your ideas with your colleagues, your District Superintendent, and with me so we can collaborate.

RESOURCES OFFERED TO YOU . . . Along with your plan and covenant, we are offering some resources that may be helpful to you for your reference.

Have you considered the use of signage to clarify your requirements (masking, health concerns, etc.)? [Several examples of signage](#) that you are free to utilize are on the conference website.

1. As we learn more about emerging concerns about liability, we strongly encourage you to use a waiver for third-party groups, as well as for volunteers from the church during any interaction with the public through food pantries, clothing closets, etc. These waivers are being created and will be on the website soon.
2. As we invite church members to be present for hospitality ministries or program ministries, we have created a covenant (download [here](#)) that will be discussed in the legal webinar described below. Some samples to [request an exception](#) or for a [full re-opening plan](#) are available for you to utilize as models and templates if they can be helpful.

A BLESSING TO YOU . . . Just as I began this update with thanksgiving for your courage in face of the Coronavirus pandemic, I again offer my heartfelt appreciation for you. I pray for the day when we will leave the pandemic behind us. Until then, as we are reminded in Philippians 2:1-4, “Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.” Let that one purpose be the glorification of God in Jesus Christ through our worship, our ministry and our mission.

In Christ,
Bishop Bob