

General Minister and President on re-opening congregations

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I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. — John 13:34-35 (NRSV)

Rev. Teresa “Terri” Hord Owens

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Dear Church:

We are in Eastertide, when we rejoice in the good news of the resurrection, and yet so much our journey still feels like the wilderness. I continue to pray for you as we walk through these days of distancing together.

This week, some state governments are beginning to lift stay-at-home orders and allow some businesses and industries to reopen their doors. These reopening conversations are understandably raising questions about how and when churches should resume in-person worship services. These are difficult decisions, but I want to encourage you, as difficult as it is, not to rush too quickly back. It is not yet time to gather for worship in person.

I know that it is heartbreaking not to be able to gather. We want nothing more than to hug our loved ones and squeeze the hands of our grieving friends. We want nothing more than to worship together and join our voices together in song. We want nothing more than to break bread together at our beloved communion tables.

But the [phased reopening plans](#) developed by public health experts call for several benchmarks to indicate safety such as 14 days of declining case counts, widespread testing, and contact tracing. We are not there yet.

The economic impact of this pandemic is devastating, to be sure, and many of the decisions to reopen business are in response. There is and will be much work to do as we care for our hurting neighbors.

Church, we don't make decisions based on economics. We make decisions based on love. And here in this time, in the midst of this pandemic, the loving thing to do is not to gather for worship. Love, as we know from 1 Corinthians 13:4-5, is patient. Love does not insist on its own way.

It is not easy to love from a distance. It is not easy to overcome our own desire for being physically close to our church family. It is not easy to give up the familiar in favor of this new way of being.

It is likely we will never meet in quite the same way again. But we have a historic opportunity here. We have the chance to test new ways, learn creatively, imagine beyond old boundaries and grow in our understanding of the family of God.

Let me be clear: even as we have gathered in different ways, we are still the church. Even as we have worshiped on Facebook and YouTube from our living room couches, even as we have prayed over Zoom, we are the church, and God is at work in and through us. We will continue to be the church.

There are a number of resources available for helping congregations think through how and when to resume in-person worship services, and we have linked to several of them on our COVID-19 resource page. I found [this guidance from the Wisconsin Council of Churches](#) and [this pastoral letter from Disciples pastor Brandon Gilvin](#) particularly helpful.

In addition, [this letter from the College of Regional Ministers](#) offers wisdom and hope. Many regional ministers are also offering guidance based on realities in your local context. I urge you to listen to them and to be in conversation with one another as you make prayerful decisions with your church leadership.

I have been inspired by the creativity, innovation, and compassion from Disciples over the past two months. You are already imagining new ways of being church, and I have confidence that we will face the future together with courage and grace, strengthened always by the love of God.

Grateful to be serving with you,

Rev. Terri Hord Owens

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