

# Regional ministers offer a word on re-opening congregations

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## A Letter to the Church on Being the Church in This Moment

Dear Disciples of Christ,

As your Regional Ministry colleagues, we have listened carefully and prayerfully to the questions you are asking about when and how to meet again in person as the Church. We are asking many of the same questions.

We miss being with you in the spaces where we worship God together, witness the baptisms of eager youth full of hope and share the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation. It has been months now since last we hugged or shook hands. It has been too long since we have seen you in person, and yet we continue to be inspired by your acts of service and leadership that we see on-line, and we continue to celebrate your ministry and share your story. It troubles our spirits to know that we cannot be physically present for funerals, visit at hospital bedsides or join in the celebrations of commissioning or ordination.

We are aware that this is an unprecedented time of challenge and uncertainty. Even medical experts are not ready to declare that they understand fully how this very contagious virus works, the range at which it can spread, or how to enhance prevention with a vaccine. It has already cost the lives of tens of thousands of our neighbors and more than a million confirmed cases have been reported in the U.S. and Canada.

The disease does not discriminate but we can take steps to protect the most vulnerable among us.

First and foremost, we write to encourage you to be patient and take your time, and not rush back into full in-person activities before we are confident it is safe to do so. We also write to ask that you join us in considering these questions when you discuss whether and how to be together again in sanctuaries, fellowship halls, classrooms, offices, and other special, sacred spaces. In addition to logistical questions about how to share communion, have appropriate social distancing, and disinfect the sanctuary, etc., consider these deeper, theological questions also:

- How have you found ways to share in ministry without gathering as you normally did?
- If you hosted online worship, Bible study, or other ministry, what have you discovered that may be encouraging or helpful for the times ahead?
- Who are the people among you who have shown themselves to be strong, loving, and wise companions in this challenging time?
- We are often acutely aware of what we miss in a time such as Has the congregation gained anything that it did not have or realize a gift or a strength it already had before?

- In what ways might the congregation be affected if, because of contracting the novel corona virus at your next in-person gathering, a member or visitor's illness resulted in death?
- Jesus said to the first disciples: *I give you a new commandment, that you love one*

*Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.* John 13:34 (NRSV) What will we do, who love one another as Jesus loved, when the medical community continues to call attention to the risks of in-person meetings?

We do not presume to have all the answers for you. Every congregation will prayerfully and carefully discern for itself how and when to reconnect onsite. What we can offer is to tell you how we Regional Ministers and the General Units of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are dealing with our own gatherings.

*We will not make on-site visits for the time being. We believe that we have a responsibility to exercise an abundance of caution for the safety of all those we serve. We will reconsider that decision when there is more medical evidence that the pandemic has been effectively contained.*

We Disciples are a people bound by nothing more or less than a covenant with God and one another. When we read together in worship the Preamble to the Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), we conclude with this powerful reminder of the extent of our shared calling: We are carrying on our work online, many from spaces in our homes. We are meeting once a week by Zoom and we are connecting with pastors and lay leaders by phone, email, text, and social media. We are sharing some of the best information and creative resources being compiled. These are available on disciples.org, regional websites and social media outlets. Frankly, we would be devastated if the health of any one of us were compromised because another of us were, unknowingly, carriers of the virus. By God's grace and your support, we have the means to keep in touch, do the work you have come to expect from us, and pray with you.

*In the bonds of Christian faith  
we yield ourselves to God  
that we may serve the One whose kingdom has no end.  
Blessing, glory, and honor be to God forever. Amen.* (from the Preamble to the Design)

With you, we desire to bless, glorify, and honor God in this moment and always.

Affectionately yours in Christ,

- John Mobley, Alabama/Northwest Florida
- Jay Hartley, Arizona
- LaTaunya Bynum, Northern California/Nevada
- Jennifer Garbin, Canada
- Allen Harris, Capital Area
- Joan Bell-Haynes, Central Rocky Mountain
- Betsy Goehring, Florida

- Denise Bell, Georgia
- Nadine Burton, Great River Region
- Teresa Dulyea-Parker, Illinois/Wisconsin
- Rick Spleth, Indiana & Ohio
- Ken Marston & Steve Martin, Kansas
- Bill Rose-Heim, Greater Kansas City
- Dean Phelps, Kentucky & Ohio
- Eugene James, Michigan & Ohio
- Paul Koch & Ron Routlege, Mid-America
- Chris Morton, Nebraska
- Valerie Melvin, North Carolina
- Thad Allen, Northeastern, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia & Ohio
- Sandy Messick, Northern Lights
- Pam Holt, Oklahoma
- Cathy and Doug Wirt, Oregon/SW Idaho
- Richie Sanchez, Pacific Southwest
- Andy Mangum, Southwest
- Christal Williams, Tennessee
- John Richardson, Upper Midwest
- Bill Spangler-Dunning, Virginia