



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
HARRISBURG AREA – SUSQUEHANNA CONFERENCE

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*And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.
(Philippians 1:9-11)*

Dear Beloved Sisters and Brothers of the Susquehanna Conference,

Grace to you in the name of Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace, Healer of our brokenness, and Hope of the World!

You have been waiting patiently through the pandemic for the day when you can reopen your church buildings for in-person worship. In the meantime, you have initiated some creative ways to offer worship, compassionate ministry, and faith-formation ministries. Though COVID-19 may be limiting our physical movements, it does not at all restrict the Holy Spirit. God is working in this world and we are still part of it. Thanks be to God!

I am pleased that many of our churches put together discernment groups that have been keeping up with COVID developments in their areas and have prayerfully listened for God's guidance in how to respond. These groups have helped maintain the spiritual center of their churches' pandemic response. I am grateful for all who have committed their time, hearts, minds, and prayers to this ministry.

Recently, I alerted you that the Cabinet would gather information and discuss in prayerful discernment how to advise our churches as they consider opening their buildings for in-person worship. We gathered information from many sources, some of it from our pastors. We also convened a meeting with medical researchers who are on top of the developments in COVID-19 and its emerging variants (and who are faithful members of our churches). We used what we learned to develop the attached guidelines.

We know that every church has its particular mix of congregation size; the average age of worshipers; the location, age, and condition of church buildings; and other factors. These guidelines are adaptable to these various contexts.

I wish to highlight these points:

- The most important factor is to be sure that the room you use for worship has excellent air exchange. We are told by experts in the field that COVID is spread primarily through airborne particles and can stay suspended in the air for 13 hours.
- Emerging variants of the virus are even more contagious and will be spreading to Pennsylvania. Be sure to factor this into your decision.
- If and when your church decides to open the building for worship, wearing face coverings and maintaining social distancing are still essential and required practices.

Please read the attached recommendations carefully because they provide important elaboration on these points. We recommend that a team of laypeople along with your clergyperson/pastoral leader work together on the discernment, decision, and planning for your faithful next steps in returning to in-person gatherings.

We have learned that ionization systems installed in air handling systems (HVACs) can, when used in addition to face coverings and social distancing, decrease the amount of the virus in the air. Ionizers emit ions (charged particles) that may capture some of the contaminants that otherwise would be too small to filter out. The Susquehanna Conference is willing to offer churches a \$500 rebate toward the cost of ionizers installed in their air handlers. Installations made since March 2020 are eligible. To receive this rebate, please email proof of purchase/installation from the vendor to Darlene Eisenhuth at deisenhuth@susumc.org and copy your district administrative assistant.

Pastors, please consider the health of you and your family as you think about returning to in-person worship. If health issues put you and/or your family at high risk, please continue to keep your Staff/Pastor Parish Relations Committee and district superintendent informed about your concerns. You and your leadership may want to continue to lead worship in alternative ways rather than in-person.

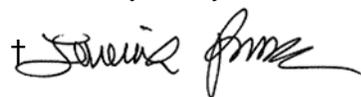
Clergy are in the 1B category for receiving the vaccine in Pennsylvania. I urge you to get the vaccine as soon as you can, not only for your wellbeing but that of others. If you need verification of your status and you cannot locate your credentials or something from the church (like a paystub) please email verification@susumc.org and proof of status will be sent to you.

Remembering that Jesus told us to love our neighbors, I continue to implore you to uphold high standards of safety protocols to prevent the spread of this terrible virus. In all of your considerations, I strongly encourage you to put this commitment first. You may find it wise, in your church's situation, to exceed the guidelines we are suggesting here.

Our conference disaster response coordinator, Doug Hoy, and our medical advisory group members are available to consult with you should you want additional assistance in your COVID safety planning.

May God continue to bless your faithfulness and your perseverance.

In Ministry with you,



Jeremiah J. Park

Rev. Dr. Paul Amara, Williamsport District

Rev. Catherine Boileau, York District

Ms. Joyce Davis, Conference Lay Leader

Mr. Mark Knecht, Conference Treasurer and Benefits Officer

Rev. Brenda K. Leigey, State College District

Rev. Victoria Rebeck, Director of Connecting Ministries

Rev. Barry Robison, Harrisburg District

Rev. Dr. Tom Salsgiver, Assistant to the Bishop

Rev. Gary Shockley, Director of Equipping Vital Congregations

Rev. Judy L. Walker, Scranton/Wilkes-Barre District

Rev. Dr. Gary D. Weaver, Lewisburg District

Rev. Dr. Joleen A. Willis, Altoona District

Rev. Kevin Witt, Director of Growing Spiritual Transformational Leaders