



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
HARRISBURG AREA – SUSQUEHANNA CONFERENCE

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*“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Luke 1:78-89)*

*“But those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount  
up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary,  
they shall walk and not faint”. (Isaiah 4:31)*

Dear 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've made it through a most unusual summer. The pandemic disrupted your plans for Lent, Easter, and vacation Bible school, among others. Yet you stepped up with creativity and resolve. I am so grateful for your openness to change and willingness to find new ways to guide your congregations in worship, spiritual growth, and caring about their neighbors as you provide safety protocols for their wellness.

Seasons change as time goes by, too fast for some and too slow for others. Soon, Fall will be here with us and Winter will not be far away. Now you are starting to plan for Advent and Christmas. These are among the most beloved seasons of the church year. At the same time, due to the inevitable temperature change, you are considering more activities in the church building as outdoor options become less available.

As we face seasonal change in the midst of the pandemic, we are facing the unresolved uncertainty about the containment of COVID-19. With the flu season coming, more concerns about protection and safety are raised.

My hope is that all our churches can continue to demonstrate vitality in ministry and witness and will offer a faith-filled and joyous season of the church, including Advent and Christmas services, while also maintaining safety practices. If you are meeting in person here are a few suggestions to help you plan:

- First, unless the Pennsylvania Department of Health recommends otherwise for all indoor gatherings, continue to limit room occupancy to 25 people, ensure six feet of social-distancing space between each person, require masks, provide hand-washing/sanitizing stations, and disinfect rooms where people gather.

- Consider offering the Christmas service in more than one room in the building. Set up rooms to maintain social distancing. If possible, broadcast to these rooms. Or consider other clergy (deacons, retired clergy, those in extensions ministries, etc.) or lay people with good leadership skills to lead the same service in the other rooms. Think through how people will enter and exit the spaces making sure there is enough room to be properly distanced.
- Add services throughout the week to spread out the attendance. Perhaps offer services in the late afternoon and/or evening on Dec. 24, or more than one on Dec. 25.
- “Drive-in” services may still be possible. You might investigate using a radio frequency to broadcast the sound. You can find more information [here](#).
- All those able to wear a mask must wear one. Offer hand-washing/sanitizing stations and face coverings. Our conference disaster response ministry has provided hand sanitizer and face masks for our churches in every district. Contact your district office to obtain some.
- No hugs and handshakes. This may be one of the most difficult things to prevent. Suggest alternatives, such as bowing or other gestures at a distance.
- Continue online worship, regardless.
- As you replenish cleaning supplies, keep in mind that The United Methodist Church has arranged for discounts from Home Depot and Lowe’s. Specific information can be found [here](#).

These are just a few suggestions. As we find more, we will share them.

As the Labor Day Weekend ends and the school year just started, the next several weeks will be critical to considering if any change in the safety protocol is warranted. I trust that you are ever more faithfully seeking discernment as you serve God and love God’s people in a way that is fitting to your context of ministry. However, I continue to urge you to put safety and wellness of life as the top priority for such a time as this.

As dire needs of your community expand so does your missional response. Thanks be to God for you! Your commitment and love for God’s people and those who do not yet know Christ is inspiring.

Things will be different this Fall and Winter. But we can be confident that Christ will always be with us, for “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). Let us be reminded that a light comes to dispel darkness; that a vulnerable child, born in modest circumstances, would become the Savior and Lord of the world. His name is Immanuel, God with us.

In Ministry with You,

†   
Jeremiah Park