

December 30, 2021

Dear Siblings in Christ,

Please know that we continue to pray for the health and wholeness of each one of you and for people around the world. In light of the very contagious Omicron variant of COVID-19, we urge you to review your in-person worship and discipleship plans. Keep yourself updated on the latest information for infection rates in your area. Continue to access Center for Disease Control (CDC) and official local health department guidelines for how to best protect yourself, your congregations, and your family. Please know that we support you as you provide online worship and gathering experiences. If at any time due to high infection rates, after consultation with the clergy and lay leadership, you determine that the church needs to return to all virtual gatherings until infection rates are lower, we will support your decision.

Laity, we urge you to extend an extra dose of grace to your pastors as they enter the third calendar year of bearing the responsibility of balancing the tension between keeping everyone safe while advancing the mission of the church. Physical and emotional exhaustion is real among our pastors. The best Christmas and New Year's gifts you can give them are your grace and words of good cheer.

We encourage the following behaviors and procedures recognizing that persons without symptoms can spread the virus. We love our neighbors and need to be intentional about protecting others:

- Please strongly encourage, if not require, mask wearing at all church gatherings and remember masks that do not gap are best. Small children and some persons with particular mental health issues have difficulty wearing masks so exercise good judgement.
- Please encourage members of the church to get vaccinated and boosted when it is time.
- Encourage unvaccinated church and community members to take advantage of online worship opportunities.
- Stay away and encourage others to stay away from gatherings if they are not feeling well
- Follow the CDC and local health official quarantine and disinfection guidelines for anyone who has tested positive or been exposed to COVID.
- Practice maintaining distance between persons who are not living together in the same household.
- Pass the peace or greet persons by waving, bowing, a nod of the head. Avoid hugs and handshakes. Do not hold hands for prayer.
- Do not use a Common Cup for Communion. Do not leave water in your baptismal fonts.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces – put sanitizing wipes in your Church bathrooms. Consider pausing childcare and moving children's ministries online when infection rates are high.
- Establish organized ways to check in and check up on persons who become ill for any reason so that your congregation may establish helpful ways of making sure those who are sick or shut in can get access to necessities.

Your Bishops, District Superintendents, and Conference staff all desire for all of our church buildings to be places of sanctuary or safety. Please put into practice the actions and decisions – both individually and communally - that will help to keep the coronavirus from spreading.

We join our prayers with yours as we navigate how to share God's love with the communities we serve in ever-changing circumstances.

Blessings to you,
Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi and Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball