



A Letter to the IGRC - Dec. 9, 2020

Hello,

I greet you in the wonderful name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

On Nov. 17, I directed that all congregations within the Illinois Great Rivers Conference suspend in-person worship services through Dec. 13. This action was caused by a resurgence of Covid-19 cases in our State and across the Nation. All of the United Methodist Bishops across the Midwest and specifically, those within the North Central Jurisdiction, took similar actions.

At a recent gathering of our College of Bishops, we shared and discussed the current status of this pandemic and the response that we would have as United Methodist episcopal leaders. Here are three things that we have noticed across our episcopal areas:

1. The majority of laity and clergy, while saddened by the decision to refrain from in-person worship, understand the temporary need for this brief suspension and are fully compliant.
2. A few of our constituents feel that the decision to worship in-person or to refrain from in-person worship should be made at the local church level. While nearly all of those in this category have been compliant, they have shared their disappointments with the District Superintendents and with their respective Bishops.
3. There is no decision that will please everyone! We are not a "one size fits all" denomination, or society. In fact, the current climate toward leadership, of any kind, is not tilting toward the positive scale. It is our desire to offer guidance as episcopal leaders which respects each pastor and congregation within our episcopal areas.

It was my hope that by taking a four-week break from in-person services that we would be able to improve the numbers so as to be able to return to our churches for weekly services Dec. 20 and for Christmas Eve.

Currently, the numbers have not improved. In many areas of the state the statistics are worse. Many of our communities are facing a shortage of hospital beds and are experiencing an overflow in their Intensive Care Units as the number of Covid-19 cases increase.

For the good of our 800 plus congregations and communities where they reside, and in conjunction with the United Methodist Bishops and churches across our jurisdiction, I am strongly recommending our churches not to meet for indoor worship until further notice. This will require us to be more creative and strategic for Christmas Eve and Christmas weekend services.

I encourage pastors and laity to continue to provide virtual worship, drive-in worship, and outdoor worship services. These services should be offered using the proper guidelines for social distancing. It is important that face masks be required at all non-virtual gatherings and that these masks be worn at all times.

Let me be perfectly clear, the current rise in Covid-19 infections, across our state and region, are worse than they were four weeks ago. I strongly recommend that pastors across the IGRC refrain from in-person worship in our church buildings and facilities.

Many have requested that outdoor worship, along with drive-in worship services be allowed for Christmas Eve. After careful and prayerful consideration, we agree, and encourage outdoor worship to be conducted. Please take the necessary safety precautions as suggested in our Covid-19 Guidelines.

As a part of our connectional covenant as United Methodist across the State and the North Central Jurisdiction, our Conference Leadership Team would like to invite you to join us at 6 p.m. Christmas Eve as individuals or as household units, in gathering on your porches, yards or sidewalks of your homes to lift up lights (representing Christ) as we sing or ring bells to Silent Night together. We believe this can be a strong effective witness to our unity and our Christian faith. While still observing social distancing guidelines, feel free to invite neighbors and friends to join us.

In addition, the extended Cabinet has joined me in putting together a virtual service that can be used by any of our congregations for Christmas.

I also want to address issues that have reached my desk regarding the pandemic.

First, as Bishop of the Illinois Area, I am charged with ordering the life of the church in the geographic area to which I am assigned in accordance with paragraphs 401 to 405 of The Book of Discipline (2016).

Second, because these guidelines are from the church and not from the government, the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision regarding guidelines to churches in New York does not apply to the Illinois Great Rivers Conference. I am not taking away anyone's right to worship, nor am I encouraging Christians to "forsake assembling together." My request, while requiring new methods, does not force anyone to cease worship.

Finally, I want to applaud you for your willingness to work with your pastor to ensure that ministry continues despite limitations that are related to the pandemic.

While everyone has their personal desires and preferences, Christ reminds us that love of God and love of neighbor are the two greatest commandments.

A response that places the love of neighbor ahead of one's own personal preferences will, in the long-term, be a stronger witness to our faith. Acting wisely does not indicate a lack of trust in God but it does result in moving us closer to what we all want – a church that is healthy, alive and vibrant safely gathering together.

God bless,

Bishop Frank J. Beard

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