



The Presbytery of Western North Carolina

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A Letter to the Churches of the Presbytery of Western North Carolina

From The Task Force on Returning to Face-to-Face Gatherings in PWNC

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Greetings in the name of the Triune God, our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

Having been created by General Council to provide guidance and make recommendations to the Presbytery regarding the prospect of returning to face-to-face gatherings in churches, we last communicated with you in a letter [on May 21st](#). In the meantime, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has provided a helpful resource regarding [Returning to Public Worship](#).

At the time of our previous letter, our recommendations were premised on the conviction that the well-being of what God has made is the right beginning place in considering returning to face-to-face activities in our churches. Those recommendations were also oriented around the fact that North Carolina was just entering a prolonged Phase 2 in its response to the health crisis posed by COVID-19. Both things continue to be the case: our basic concern is the health and well-being of our communities (church and beyond) and we are still in Phase 2 until at least July 17.

The Task Force recognizes that all of our churches are not impacted in the same way by COVID-19. Some counties within PWNC have relatively few confirmed cases, while others have significant rates of infection. We are also aware that nationwide the picture of where infections occur has recently changed suddenly and dramatically. Therefore, our central concern continues to be mindful of the Body as a whole, protecting the vulnerable and encouraging the safest practices for our various communities.

We know that our sessions are confronted with a profound task of discernment as they do the cost-benefit analysis for their congregations. You have to balance the need people have to be with each other and the worry about the erosions of steady habits and rhythms of worship, fellowship, and service—against the ruinous presence of a pernicious pathogen that clearly has not subsided. You

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have to assess what resources and energy are present in your particular household of faith to meet simultaneously the needs of those who yearn to be together—and of those who know they cannot return to face-to-face gatherings until a vaccine has been made available and effective therapies have been developed. You have to estimate whether an invitation to regather will not only be joyfully received by some—but might also encourage others for whom gathering would be unwise to put themselves at risk. You are making your discernment in varying ways as you assess the circumstances of your churches and communities, and you continue in our prayers as you do so.

Our task is to provide the best guidance and recommendations we can muster for the presbytery as a whole. In this respect our advice remains largely unchanged from our previous communication. **Out of an abundance of caution, the Task Force does not encourage face-to-face gatherings inside at this time.** We are sure that any congregations who do gather inside will seek to practice the guidance offered by both church and health leaders about limiting numbers, social distancing, wearing masks, avoiding congregational singing, and sanitizing surfaces. But we wonder whether these necessary cautions may make the experience less vital than the alternative means of providing for the worship life of a congregation which we have lately been learning.

Similarly, our recommendations about outdoor gatherings and Vacation Bible School are the same as before.

Congregations that are finding ways to gather (both formally and informally) in outdoor settings are encouraged to attend carefully to several issues. They should know what local sound ordinances may allow or prohibit. They are also encouraged to consider how members will remain socially distant, practice appropriate greetings upon arriving and departing, experience music without group singing and be provided with restroom access that includes frequent sanitation. If congregations choose to gather outdoors, please think through and make plans for these and a myriad of other details.

Vacation Bible School and other gatherings where children and youth come together should be reevaluated and/or reconsidered. Virtual formats where children might gather for an abbreviated VBS are recommended to protect children and older adults who are often prominent among the faithful VBS volunteers. If you need help in identifying available alternatives for your congregation, please be in touch with the presbytery office. It can refer you to programs that other congregations of presbytery have discovered.

The creativity and innovation we observed among our congregations two months into the pandemic has continued. But we also recognize the strain that many have felt at having to “produce” worship in new formats that tax the experience and available time of leaders. The presbytery office is already seeking to identify resources that may give pastors and other worship leaders some respite from the week in and week out challenge of generating worship in new ways—especially as we come into a season that traditionally has offered these leaders a break from the routine. We urge you to

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communicate to presbytery staff about needs for new kinds of “pulpit supply” in these uncharted waters.

As we predicted in our previous communication, the **Presbytery meeting scheduled for July 28 will definitely happen as a Zoom meeting.** More details will be forthcoming later this week but be assured that it is possible to participate in the meeting with as simple a device as a traditional telephone. **It will be important for every session to have the appropriate commissioners participate in the meeting because the General Presbytery Nominating Committee will be presenting a nominee to become our next General Presbyter.** In addition, the preacher for the meeting will be the Rev. Diane Moffett, executive director of the Presbyterian Mission Agency in Louisville, KY.

We continue to give thanks that God is not contained in sanctuaries made of human hands but rather dwells in the hearts of those who love, worship and serve God and in the world into which God calls them. As sessions make their discernment about regathering, let us resolve to show the world that *we have not stopped being the church.* Instead, let us continue to learn how mission and ministry can be expressed in *new ways of being church.* Let us continue to do the work of Jesus’ disciples by bringing people together, meeting human need and enjoying and glorifying God.

Grace and Peace,

Blake Daniel, Dot Descieux, Dick Larson, Whit Malone, Marcia Mount Shoop, Lauren Vanacore, Cam Murchison and Billy Robinson