



The Presbytery of Western North Carolina

May 21, 2020

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.

At the General Council meeting on May 13, 2020, the Council created a Task Force to provide guidance and make recommendations to the Presbytery regarding the prospect of returning to face to face gatherings in churches. The Task Force continues to believe that the fundamental concern of God for the well-being of what God has made is the right framework in which to consider the matter of returning to face-to-face activities in our churches.

The Task Force is made up of members representing various counties within the bounds of the Presbytery. Thus, we understand that what is happening in one county regarding Covid-19 cases and testing may not be happening in other counties. Our central concern, however, is to be mindful of the Body as a whole, to protect the vulnerable and to encourage the safest practices for our various communities.

In the last two months, the Presbytery leadership and members of the Task Force have observed incredible unity, creativity and innovation as congregations have sought to stay connected through worship, fellowship, care and mission. God has done a new thing among us as we have learned to worship and serve with depth and integrity through various means. The Task Force commends each congregation and its leadership for stretching beyond what some may have thought was possible. Again, we have learned that with God all things are possible!

Last Saturday, a federal district court ruled that the state of North Carolina could not prohibit houses of worship from gathering together provided they followed “recommendations for social distancing measures and for reducing transmission to the extent that it is practical.” **The Task Force believes that just because we *may* gather, does not mean that we *should*. Consider the Apostle Paul’s counsel to the church in Corinth, “All things are lawful, but not all things are beneficial. All things are lawful, but not all things build up” (I Corinthians 10:23).**

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As North Carolina prepares to enter Phase two (May 24 or May 31 through June 22 or July 12), gatherings in houses of worship are now possible, but the Task Force questions how realistic this is. The overriding advice from public health officials is that vulnerable populations of people should still focus on staying home to stay safe. Each congregation must ask for itself: if only some can gather, but not all, is this inclusive of our membership? Moreover, will gathering face-to-face give implicit encouragement to vulnerable populations to participate and thus place themselves at increased risk? **Therefore, out of an abundance of caution, the Task Force does not encourage face-to-face gatherings inside at this time.** While a harsh reality to grapple with, safely gathering indoors and in-person may not be possible until a vaccine is discovered. The Task Force grieves this reality and knows that congregations are struggling both physically and emotionally with how to keep Covid-19 safety practices going for the indefinite future.

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.

Two specific details the Task Force has addressed are Vacation Bible School and the Presbytery meeting slated for Tuesday, July 28. First, **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 is recommended to protect children and older adults who are often prominent among the faithful VBS volunteers. Efforts will be made to identify such resources developed in some of our churches and suggest ways they may be shared.

Second, the **Presbytery meeting scheduled for July 28 is expected to transition to a virtual format.** Please stay tuned as details about this meeting are developed. General Council is currently considering the best way for us to worship together in such a format and the best ways to bring all critical business before the body.

We 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. In these unprecedented days we have the privilege to show the world that *we have not stopped being the church.* Instead, we have learned to transition our mission and ministry into new ways of being church. Thus, we are still doing the work of Jesus Christ to bring people together, to meet human need and to enjoy and glorify God.

The Task Force meeting began and ended with fervent prayers for the people and churches of the Presbytery of Western North Carolina, joining with the faithful prayers it believes you are making for one another and the world God so loves.

Grace and Peace,

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