

February 17, 2021

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

To all reading this we wish peace, comfort and safety in the name of our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

It would appear that, as a nation, we are finally beginning to see the glimmers of hope and promise. Vaccinations have begun rolling out, and many of our most senior and most vulnerable citizens are being or have already been vaccinated. There is the realistic prospect of one or two more vaccines being approved for emergency use over the next two months. All of these things are cause for joy and praise. What we must now do, though, is work through the difficult, and often confusing, recommendations concerning a resumption of face-to-face gathering in all of our worship and social forms. Many of you have already experienced, either vicariously or in person, the devastating impact of COVID-19. We know that some groups of individuals are clearly more vulnerable to the severe manifestations of this disease than others, and advanced age is high on that list. The median age for all Presbyterians in PCUSA is 59, so age must be a factor in our planning.

Since March 2020 this task force has attempted to offer realistic but, hopefully, helpful recommendations about worshipping and sharing safely. We fully appreciate that our Presbytery is made up of congregations of very different sizes with very different physical and social circumstances. It would seem clear that there is no one, universal approach that should be adopted nor that we should recommend. Congregations within our Presbytery have found an incredible array of creative ways to worship and fellowship. While the impulse to have face to face gatherings again is strong, there are still substantive safety issues that faith communities must continue to prioritize going forward.

After examining the data and the Governor's recommendations, it is our feeling that it is not yet time to relax our vigilance. With the appearance of numerous mutated strains of the virus, and the uncertainty as to when we will have achieved wide-spread, community vaccinations, we are suggesting that indoor, face-to-face worship and

fellowship be entertained only after thoughtful discernment, with care and consideration given to all of the best practices outlined in the October 2020 letter.

We completely understand that, ultimately, each congregation, their session and their pastor will have to determine what is the wisest and most practical approach for them. Prolonged periods of separation clearly erode some of the sense of involvement for many of our members, while prolonged, premature face-to-face encounters pose potential hazards. God's presence with us in the wilderness of COVID19 continues to give us the strength and stamina we need to not simply endure this time, but to grow in our faith. God's presence empowers us to be discerning and to not rush into something that may create harm in our communities. And it is God's providential love and healing power that will take us into a new day for us as church when we are able to gather face to face again. We join with each of you with hands remotely clasped in sisterhood and brotherhood, asking for God's guidance and wisdom as we move forward together.

Grace and Peace,

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