

December 3, 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

Blake Daniel, MWS, First-Sylva (Jackson County)

Dot Descieux, RE, Kenilworth; member of General Council (Buncombe County)

Dick Larson, RE, Banner Elk; Moderator of Presbytery of WNC (Avery County)

Whit Malone, MWS, First-Hickory; Vice-Chair of COM (Catawba County)

Marcia Mount Shoop, MWS, Grace-Covenant (Buncombe County)

Lauren Vanacore, MWS, First-Gastonia; Chair of General Council (Gaston County)

Byron Wade, General Presbyter

Billy Robinson, Associate Presbyter

Cam Murchison, Stated Clerk

Grace and peace to you, in the name of our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,

As COVID 19 levels climb all over North Carolina and the United States, the Task Force convened to once again prayerfully discern how God is calling us as a church to be strong and courageous witnesses to Christ's healing love in these challenging times.

We acknowledge and affirm the faithful processes of discernment that continue in all of your congregations. As the pandemic wears on and intensifies, we also acknowledge the weariness that some are feeling. The death rates and infection rates are difficult to fathom, and living in a world gripped by so much suffering adversely impacts us all. We also acknowledge that the impact of this pandemic bears the marks of historic injustices around race and economic disparities. Part of God's call to us as a church is to take all of these impacts and challenges into account as we discern the mind of Christ for our faith communities.

In our October letter we recommended that Sessions and their Pastoral Staff use caution and be continually mindful of the health impacts and risks of meeting indoors. We want to emphasize that those impacts are not just felt in our congregations, but they impact the larger communities in which our congregations exist.

According to medical professionals tracking COVID 19 rates in Western North Carolina, some counties are experiencing spikes in infection rates that can be traced to religious gatherings. Another factor to take into account is that in some areas, community spread has become so prevalent that contact tracing is near impossible in many cases. All of these things invite a sober assessment in all of our congregations around whether there is a way to safely worship indoors during the Winter months.

All of the best practices we offered in our [October letter](#) remain advice we encourage congregations to take into account. We pray that congregations can continue to be responsive and adaptive, and ready to make courageous choices for the safety of the larger community as Winter sets in and the Holy season of Advent and Christmas arrive.

In the Spirit of our collective well-being and the freedom that Christ gives us to live a life focused on the well-being of all others, we offer these additional thoughts for your consideration:

- We commend special attention to the [county alert system](#) that has been set up now by the State of North Carolina. This system is an easy color-coded measure of where your county is in terms of infection rates. With hospitals all over the state either reaching capacity or nearing capacity, monitoring where your county is on this alert system can be of critical assistance to you in your discernment.
- The Task Force has created a Tool Kit (add link) to support congregations with technological challenges and resources. There are many great options for safe online gatherings that can help your communities remain connected and encouraged in real time. This tool kit will be added to as new resources come to our attention.
- With rates of community spread as they are all over North Carolina, remember that any sized gathering indoors may well have a percentage of COVID positive participants who are either asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic, but still contagious.
- We know there are congregations who have decided to worship indoors and who are doing so faithfully. We encourage you to abide by all the necessary safety protocols as you meet (which are outlined in our October letter, linked above). We also encourage vigilance and weekly re-evaluation of your context. Be clear with your congregations that things may well change and that they have the resilience and faithfulness to live into those challenges.
- Remain committed to your congregation's sense of call to the larger community. Consider how your church can be a source of healing and support through prayer, resource-sharing, and strengthening relationships.

Christ's church has never been about buildings or particular worship spaces. One of the powerful gifts of our faith tradition is the way Jesus' followers have been equipped to adapt and remain faithful in painful and even dangerous circumstances. Our Presbyterian ancestors, in particular, found their faith strengthened in diaspora. This capacity to not only persevere but to even grow and increase in faithfulness is part of

our blood memory as people of the church reformed and always reforming. May we all have the eyes to see and the hearts to receive the God-given gifts of being church in these difficult times.

Grace and Peace,

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