

A Letter to the Church on Being the Church in This Moment

Dear Disciples of Christ,

We are thankful to be your Regional Ministers. We know that you are wrestling with questions about how and when to resume in-person worship and church activities. We are asking the same questions and endeavor to walk with you as we discover answers together.

We miss being with you in the spaces where we worship God together, witness the baptisms of eager youth full of hope, and share the bread and cup at the Lord's Table. It has been months now since last we hugged or shook hands. It has been too long since we have seen you in person. However, like the Apostle Paul, we thank God for you every time we think of you. Our hearts are overjoyed and inspired by your acts of service and leadership that we see online, and we continue to celebrate your ministry and share your story. It troubles our spirits to know that we cannot be physically present for funerals, visit at hospital bedsides or join in the celebrations of commissioning, ordinations, church anniversaries, and clergy retirements, just to name a few high times in church life.

We are living in unprecedented times of challenge and uncertainty. We acknowledge and grieve the death of tens of thousands of people; they are our family members, friends, church members, and neighbors. More than a million confirmed cases are reported in the U.S. and Canada, and the numbers continue to rise. Even medical experts are not ready to declare that they fully understand how this very contagious virus works, the range at which it can spread, or what therapies or vaccines are appropriate.

The disease does not discriminate, but we can take steps to protect the most vulnerable among us.

First and foremost, with great concern and conviction, we write to encourage you to be patient, take your time, and do not rush back into full in-person activities before we are confident it is safe to do so. We also write to ask that you prayerfully join us in considering these questions when you discuss whether and how to be together again in sanctuaries, fellowship halls, classrooms, offices, and other special, sacred spaces, including children and youth activities. In addition to logistical questions about how to share communion, have appropriate social distancing, and disinfect the sanctuary, etc., consider these deeper, theological questions also:

- How have you found ways to share in ministry without gathering as you did before the pandemic?
- If you hosted online worship, Bible study, or other ministries, what have you discovered that may be encouraging or helpful for the times ahead?
- How have you been reminded of God's love, and the purpose and meaning of your life and ministry?
- Who are the people among you who have shown themselves to be strong, loving, and wise companions in this challenging time?
- We are often acutely aware of what we miss in a time such as this. However, we have discovered some things on the journey. Has your congregation gained gifts or strengths, or have you realized gifts or strengths that you had before the pandemic but did not realize?
- In what ways might the congregation be affected if, because of contracting the novel coronavirus at your next in-person gathering, a member or visitor's illness resulted in death?
- Jesus said to the first disciples: *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.* John 13:34 (NRSV) How can we be an example of Jesus' love in the same way when the medical community continues to call attention to the risks of in-person meetings?

We do not presume to have all the answers for you. Every congregation will prayerfully and carefully discern for itself how and when to reconnect onsite. What we can offer is to tell you how we Regional Ministers and leaders of the General Units of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are dealing with our gatherings.

We will not make onsite visits for the time being. We believe that we have a responsibility to exercise an abundance of caution for the safety of all those we serve. We will reconsider other decisions when there is more medical evidence that the pandemic is no longer a threat!

We are carrying on with our work online, many from spaces in our homes. We are meeting once a week by Zoom, and connecting with pastors and lay leaders by ZOOM, phone, email, text, and social media. We are sharing some of the best information and creative resources available. These are accessible on disciples.org, regional websites, and social media outlets. Frankly, we would be devastated if the health of any one of us was compromised because another of us was, unknowingly, carriers of the virus. By God's grace and your support, we have the means to keep in touch, do the work you have come to expect from us, and pray with you.

We, Disciples, are a people bound by nothing more or less than a covenant with God and one another. When we read together in worship the Preamble to the Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), we conclude with this powerful reminder of the extent of our shared calling:

In the bonds of Christian faith,
we yield ourselves to God
that we may serve the One
whose kingdom has no end.

Blessing, glory, and honor
be to God forever. Amen.

With you, we desire to bless, glorify, and honor God in this moment and always.

Affectionately yours in Christ,

The College of Regional Ministers