



Bishop Jeremiah J. Park

THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
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*“God gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary, and young persons stumble and fall;
but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.
They will soar on the wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.”
(Isaiah 40:29-31)*

*“Therefore encourage one another and build each other up,
just as in fact you are doing.”
(1 Thessalonians 5:11)*

June 24, 2020

Dear Sisters and Brothers of the Susquehanna Conference,

Grace to you in the name of Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace, Healer of our Brokenness, and Hope of the World!

I thank God for you, the clergy and laypeople of the Susquehanna Conference. The challenges confronting our ministries this year have been enormous. I have seen you rise to them with creativity, dedication, resilience, and faithfulness. Our churches continue to be beacons of God’s love, even if in different forms, during these uncertain days.

Since March 6, when the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Pennsylvania, to now, when we know of more than 82,000 cases, we have been watching and wondering how the virus would progress and what stringent steps would be required. Nevertheless, ministry has not stopped. Our clergy and leading laypeople are working harder than ever to provide worship, pastoral care, spiritual growth, outreach ministry, and witness, while observing practices that can protect lives. Thanks be to God for you!

However, now as we are preparing to enter a fourth month of life in a pandemic, we are all getting weary. The strain of learning new technologies and making other adjustments in addition to meeting our usual responsibilities is demanding and exhausting. Lay and clergy alike miss the cherished experience of worshiping alongside others. And we long for the comfort of the familiar.

I know that our pastors are receiving pressure from people to reopen our church buildings and resume worship and other activities now. Some are insisting that they no longer can wait to return to in-person worship and gatherings. We can identify with that feeling. All of us long to experience again the warmth of God's people gathered for worship and fellowship.

Nonetheless, I know that God calls us to put the needs of others above our own. This virus is quite contagious, as well as deadly. Because it's possible to catch the virus but not develop symptoms, we may carry it unknowingly and risk infecting others. The virus is still among us, so we must still take precautions with all seriousness.

The government has set safety protocols for the common good. We as United Methodist Christians, however, are called to an even higher standard. The life and ministry of Jesus teaches us that we must give primary consideration to the most vulnerable and oppressed, and care for them even before ourselves. John Wesley's first rule for Methodists is "Do no harm." Honoring our Christian baptismal vows and our identity as United Methodists requires that we do all we can to protect others' basic needs, including their health.

I urge you, then, to continue your carefully consider plans to re-introduce in-person gatherings and take steps very slowly. This transition should not be a quick one. Our conference has prepared a checklist for moving your church into the Green Phase. (Visit <https://www.susumc.org/covid-19/> and click on "SUSUMC Green Phase Guidelines.")

COVID-19 is still spreading and surging at an alarming rate in many parts of our country. The concern for resurgence of infection is real. As the resident bishop, I call on our churches to continue to observe the utmost safety precautions as a matter of faithful discipleship. Despite the painful delay in resuming worship and activities in person again, we can be assured that God is still with us; God is still our God. As we put our hope in God, let's not grow weary. God is faithful. God does and will provide for us.

My prayers continue for you in gratitude for your diligent leadership and unwavering Christ-like care of our people and our neighbors for such a time as this.

With You in Christ's Ministry,

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Jeremiah Park