



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

PHOENIX AREA
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June 24, 2020

Dear Members and Friends of the Desert Southwest Conference,

I hold you, our laity and clergy in prayer in these days of uncertainty and change. As I do so, I call upon the words from scripture to uphold the spirits of the faithful in such a time as this. In Isaiah we are assured that God gives us strength to endure and carry on even when we are physically or spiritually exhausted.

‘Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. (God) does not faint or grow weary; (God’s) understanding is unsearchable. (God) gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.’ (Isaiah 40:28-31)

Fully knowing that we are weary of the weeks of separation and suspension of in-person worship and other gatherings, this update is being sent with hope that we will not be lulled into thinking that God has abandoned us. We may be growing weary of the restraints to our usual life mandated by the restrictions and actions that are being required of us. Each of us has a critical part in the mitigation of the spread of COVID-19. Please follow the guidelines for safety precautions which include wearing a face mask, social distancing, frequent hand washing, staying at home if you are not feeling well, and cleaning and disinfecting. As the Coronavirus continues to spread in the Desert Southwest Conference, we must all be part of the solution.

Please remember that in the “Resource for Church Opening,” [on our DSC website](#), Phase 1 begins when state and local officials have reported a 14 day downward trend of cases, hospitals are treating patients without crisis care, and there is a robust testing program in place, including antibody testing. We are not yet there. In fact, in the last two weeks, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of cases of infections which has resulted in urgency about the continuing spread of the Coronavirus and serious concern about the availability of hospital beds to accommodate additional COVID patients. Based on available statistics, we are not yet ready to begin Phase 1 of the Re-Opening Plan.

As we continue to wait for a pattern of decline in infections and deaths, our United Methodist Churches must continue to suspend in-person worship and group gatherings of any size.

In the past two weeks, there have been concerns raised about specific situations being faced by churches. Consequently, new for this UPDATE are three exceptions to the restrictions as we continue in Pre-Phase 1. Beginning today, Wednesday, June 24, 2020, with the consent of your District Superintendent, these exceptions are allowed:

1. For worship planning, preparations, live streaming or recording in the church building, no more than 5 persons may be present at the same time in the same space. Strict adherence to the safety precautions in accordance with your church's re-opening plan must be observed. These should include but are not limited to observing physical distancing, washing hands frequently, wearing masks, cleaning and disinfecting touched surfaces such as the pulpit, podium, no sharing of microphones.
2. Food pantries and clothing centers that are ministries of caring and compassion offered by the church in response to the needs of the hungry in the community may resume following strict no-contact safety guidelines.
3. Child care and pre-schools may reopen following your church's reopening plan and CDC, state and local guidelines. This exception includes both third-party, non-UMC as well as church-sponsored child-care and pre-schools.

In order to open child-care or pre-schools, special legal issues must be considered. A legal webinar was offered and has been recorded and is available with notes. If you are interested in this material, please [contact our Conference Chancellor, Marilee Miller Clarke](#). I am strongly suggesting that you and your team view the webinar and develop a plan for re-opening the child-care or pre-school with your church's legal advisor. If you do not have a legal advisor, our Conference Chancellor can be consulted. There is a \$300 one-time fee for her professional consultation (a UMC reduced rate).

Although we are not yet ready to enter Phase 1, these exceptions are being offered as we work together to stop the spread of the Coronavirus and in order to allow churches to respond to humanitarian need in your communities. If you would like to request an exception, please submit a request to your District Superintendent along with your team plan for re-opening if not previously submitted.

Other than these exceptions, as we continue to wait for a pattern of decline in infections and deaths, our Desert Southwest Conference United Methodist Churches must continue to suspend in-person worship and group gatherings of any size, except for those churches that have received permission for the three exceptions mentioned above.

As I write this update, I am deeply concerned about the real possibility of a spike due to a large gathering that occurred yesterday. Contrary to the advice of our medical, and scientific experts, many persons are letting our guard down, ignoring physical distancing, and forgoing facial coverings when in public. I ask you to please be a part of the solution, not part of the problem. Think of others around you, especially the most vulnerable, and help protect them from being infected. Pray unceasingly for an end to this pandemic, give thanks for those who are working on the front lines, and for those who are battling COVID-19.

Perhaps this is the time when we remind ourselves that those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength. In time, we shall be able to come together and greet one another in person in Christ's love. But until then, let us wait with patience.

In Christ,
Bishop Bob