



New Mexico Conference of Churches
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Dear colleagues and friends in Christ,

Across the nation, and under consideration in our state, reopening is beginning. The common spirit of stay at home *for the good of all* is being replaced by different theme *let's get back to normal, NOW!* Debates rage over economic, ecological and ethical concerns and society is left, once again, seeking voices of reason, compassion, science and innovation. I have good news for you:

**Your church leaders are doing admirable work in providing
Sensible guidelines,
Measurable benchmarks, and
Compassionate concerns.**

In the cacophony of public and social media, the statements from judicatory heads and denominational agencies speak with sound reasoning to offer local church leaders the guidance they need to take the next, best steps forward. Listen to them! As I've read the material from your denominational leaders, there are some common threads I'd like to underscore.

First, each region (be that city, county or state assigned region) has a particular context: what works in Belen will fail in Las Vegas; Silver City is not Farmington; Edgewood is vastly different from Hobbs; and even the cities of Rio Rancho, Albuquerque and Santa Fe cannot be approached by a standard design. Your response and plan for reopening must be tailored to your specific context. Know the statistics of your county; know the availability of cleaning/disinfecting products, masks, and gloves; understand the medical resources available; note the best practices you discover; consult the congregations in your town or neighborhood; share your hopes and prayers with one another. Your reopening plan will address internal (congregational life) and external (community life)...with particular attention on the most vulnerable population. That population is defined in our state as: older (>64) adults, people with asthma, chronic lung conditions, immune deficiency and those receiving cancer treatment, serious heart disease, diabetes, on dialysis, severe obesity, chronic liver disease, people living in nursing facilities and other congregate settings. Know your context.

Second, the way forward is unknown; we will be dealing with the pandemic and the aftermath for the next year and perhaps longer. Spiritual trust in the faithfulness of God is our most valuable resource. This is a moment for discernment. Congregational leaders and congregations will discover new forms of ministry shaped by love of God and love of neighbor. Flexibility is important, but stopping everything to pray is crucial. Continuing the resources for the stay-at-home vulnerable folks will be necessary, even as new forms of corporate life unfold. Most clergy will be working double time; church members will be called into ministry and challenged to learn by doing! Trust the spiritual resources, renewed during the season of separation, to sustain leaders and the whole body of Christ while moving into the future.

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Community of Christ, The Episcopal Church,
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Mennonite Church USA, Presbyterian Church (USA),
Roman Catholic Church, United Church of Christ, The United Methodist Church

The New Mexico Reopening Plan has three phases, each to be initiated by the Governor when the data indicate a steady COVID-19 decline. The first announcement may come within the next two weeks for some or all regions of our state; **until then, the stay at home for the vulnerable and social distancing for all remain in place.** Religious services are allowed in Phase 1, with an appropriate list of COVID-Safe Practices (CSP) and at a specific percentage of occupancy (based on sanctuary size). Each new phase is initiated based on numbers of new COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths; there may be a step backward or extended time in each phase. The minimum period is two weeks per phase with a goal of schools opening in August; however, the whole period may extend much, much longer depending on the respectful conduct of us all.

Most of your church leaders are suggesting similar phases lasting a few weeks or months and, as the state plan, these are based on the evidence of a declining impact from COVID-19.

- **An initial period** of experimentation with small worship services (with masks and social distancing) while video conferencing, video/streamed/other resources for home worship continue --- this is a period of cautious, careful planning lasting one to several months. During this first phase, the whole life of the congregation is reconsidered by the prayerful/careful discernment of the local leaders: everything from parking lot spacing to cleaning/disinfecting practices, as well as, attention to the needs of various ages/stages, mission partnerships, direct outreach and the development of new liturgies and worship practices fit to COVID-Safe Practices. This phase is not about over functioning or drawing energy from the surrounding anxiety; practice prayerful, thoughtful planning and anticipate the Spirit's inspiration and direction...acknowledge that a slow pace may be your best choice.
- **A middle phase**, of weeks or months, during which small groups (Bible study and leadership teams) begin meeting face to face (in homes or at the church facility), experimenting with social distancing and new practices in worship expands to the allowed occupancy of church space, while video/streamed/other resources for home worship continue for the vulnerable population. At this point cleaning/disinfecting practices, as well as, building space adaptations are in place and have been refined.
- **The final phase** signals the initiation of the "new normal" for full participation in worship and in the life of the church and community: our health systems are strong and health care workers practice under less stress; a vaccine is available to all; the least of our community are protected and resourced; our sense of community and common good is deepened; and the lessons learned are fully integrated into church and community life. In the churches, the focus on prayer and discernment continues, congregations celebrate all the blessings, grieve all the losses of the COVID-19 period, and the whole communion of Jesus' people, acknowledges the faithfulness of God toward the body of Christ past, present and future.

Once again, I commend the leadership of your denomination and regional church leaders. They are wise, faithful and imaginative servants of Jesus Christ...they make my heart sing!

Grace and Peace to you,



Kay Huggins, Interim Executive Director