

Mid-Atlantic District Recommendation re. Indoor Worship

October 7, 2020

We're seven months into coronavirus time. Our initial shutdown was March 15. COVID-19 is no less a threat to public health than it was seven months ago. What has changed is that we have developed serious fatigue about doing what we've been doing to save lives.

Meeting "online" for worship and church meetings continues to be the best practice for caring for each other's health. There are still critical gaps in our scientific knowledge about COVID, including its long-term effects on physical and cognitive health, the degree to which co-infection with influenza might increase the death rate, and the kinds of air circulation and filtration systems that are needed to limit the spread of the virus. What we do know is that being inside substantially elevates the risk of transmission.

Christmas isn't going to be normal this year, but if we can hang on and in there for about as long as we've already been doing this, hopefully and prayerfully we'll have a vaccine that will allow us to be moving toward normality by Easter 2021. God is blessing us with the commitment and resources we need to be patient, not to mention virtually broadened the outreach and witness of many of our congregations.

This Advent and Christmas will be an opportunity for understanding more fully what it was like for Mary and Joseph to spend Jesus' birthday away from family and friends and the comforts of their usual routines, a season when we can 'ponder in our hearts' without all of the distractions of a typically hectic holiday season, which could be a spiritual blessing.

As your congregation makes plans for winter please keep in mind the faces of the members of your congregation, including newcomers you've connected with virtually. We have the ability and responsibility to prevent needless deaths on the road toward normality. Make decisions about reopening in the light of scriptures we've been highlighting: "Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (Phil 2:4, NASB). "Love is patient ... It does not insist on its own way ... It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (I Cor 4-7, NRSV).

Finally, if you decide to or are meeting in the building it is vital that you conscientiously follow the CDC's Pandemic Guidance for Religious Worship, and you need to have a plan in place that will be followed for what you will do if someone intentionally or unintentionally fails to follow "the rules."

We offer this recommendation through the Advent and Christmas seasons and will update it in January 2021, or as changing circumstances or new information calls for.

Unto God's gracious mercy and protection we commit you; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, be upon you, and remain with you always. **Amen.**

Gene Hagenberger
Mid-Atlantic District Executive Minister

Melvin Cheshire
Mid-Atlantic District Leadership Team
Chairperson

(We express our thanks to epidemiologist Kathryn Jacobsen, PhD, MPH, a member of our Oakton congregation and Professor of Epidemiology and Global Health at George Mason University for generously sharing her expertise and advice with us as we navigate COVID-19.)