

A Pastoral Letter to My Regional Church Family
“A Time for Questions and Capacity Building”
Eastertide 2020

Sisters and Brothers:

Eastertide is a festive season in which the church beautifully celebrates the Resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This Easter is one to remember. Our corporate life is not the same as it was a year ago, yet we have the responsibility to continue to bear witness to the very presence and peace of the Risen Christ in whom we live and breathe. The Risen Christ is with us!

I want to continue sharing with you my pastoral thoughts as the world and all creatures great and small regroup in light of COVID-19. I say, again, that these thoughts are informed by many conversations and exchanges had with local pastors, state Councils of Churches, ecumenical colleagues and regional ministers and executives in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). These thoughts are informed by the best information that we all see regarding science (and science is not anti Christian teaching and practice) and are informed by the advice and wishes of local, state and federal government. These thoughts are rooted in prayer, reason and the practice of the church.

On Saint Patrick's Day I penned to you that ***“My pastoral advice, and even request, is that we suspend all in person gatherings, as much as practicable, until Easter”***. This request was well received and for this I am grateful. Your actions have flattened the curve and are clearly signs of discipline and grace for all the world to see. The church has saved lives by our sacrifice. Thank you. This season of physical distancing can rightly be seen as ***a sign of our love for God and one another***. Sisters and Brothers, this is still our mandate, that we love on another.

When I was the pastor at our Big Run Church in Cameron, WV and then again at our Madison Avenue Church in Huntington, WV, one of the great joys of Sunday morning worship was when we came to the part in the service where we ***opened the doors of the church***. We would joyfully and expectantly invite those who had not yet made the Good Confession that Christ was Lord to come forward and do so as a prelude to their baptism. We would also ask those who desired to become members of the congregation to come forward. The doors of the church each and every week were ceremoniously opened wide for all to see. The Holy Spirit moves in our door opening. The doors of course are metaphoric and not physical, but they are just as real. The doors wide open invited God's precious children to become a more intimate part of the community of the baptized, the church. The invitation was one that genuinely and fundamentally called people forward to come and be tied to a safe people and a safe place. It is a very real call to salvation where we can safely rest in the loving arms of God. I love this part of our common life.

You might imagine, then, just how unsettling and odd it feels that now, as your regional pastor, that I am extending the Saint Patrick's Day request and am asking us to **Keep the Physical Doors of the Church Closed for the month of May**. I believe that this is the best thing for us to do in this time and place.

The month of May can be a gift to us if we will receive it as such. While there is great internal and even external pressure to get back to life as normal on Sunday mornings, we must be smart and wise and recognize that we are not a people who are obligated to yield to such pressure. We are obligated to be loving, wise and care-filled (careful) stewards of the very Body of Christ that we love and serve. **May is a good month to collect ourselves by asking good questions. Leaders ask good questions! May is a good month for us to take inventory of our gifts and capacity to open the physical doors of the church well.** Let there be no doubt: we have closed the doors very well and we owe it to the mission and to God to open them even more carefully and well than we did when we lovingly closed. Let us not undo all that we have done by prematurely coming back without thought and focus. May is a very good month to make a plan for how we will reconvene. Do not be pressured and please do not pressure; these are red flags for sure. Now is the time to ask good questions and to inventory and expand our capacity.

There is so much data available to us. It is a bit overwhelming to digest all of the guidelines from governmental and para church agencies. Today I will share one resource that I think is helpful to a loving, wise, and care filled church. This comes from the Wisconsin Council of Churches and you will find it useful. The link to this resource is <https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/> It includes things to consider and also has a nice collection of other resources included. It is good work.

As we raise questions and build capacity I truly believe that we can come back together well. If we are smart, wise and disciplined we will open doors with confidence that we are, indeed, inviting God's own into both a loving and safe community and space.

Love has mandated a new schedule and way of life. May should be received as a gift. This is a sacred time; may we make it holy by our acts of goodness, mercy and grace. Even in COVID 19 time, this is a rich time of ministry. The Holy Spirit is moving still.

Last month I told you that I love you, and that I love you enough to stay home as I do my level best to place your needs before my own. This still holds true.

Be well and Godspeed,

Your Regional Minister, +Thad