

# PRESBYTERY of *Western North Carolina*

Strengthening Congregations | Equipping Disciples | Engaging in Mission

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## **A Letter to the Churches of the Presbytery of Western North Carolina**

### **From The Task Force on Returning to Face-to-Face Gatherings in PWNC**

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Byron Wade, General Presbyter

Billy Robinson, Associate Presbyter

Cam Murchison, Stated Clerk

Greetings in the name of the Triune God, our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

Once again, we address you convinced that the well-being of the people of our churches is the right beginning place in planning for and returning to face-to-face activities in our churches. We give thanks that in varying circumstances and in different ways congregations have been finding thoughtful ways to gather for worship, ministry and mission that keeps the glory of God and the safety of God's people in clear focus. We continue to observe incredible unity, creativity and innovation as congregations seek to stay connected as church. We commend you for stretching beyond what some may have thought was impossible. As we continue to learn, with God all things are possible!

As we said in our letter in July, we know that our Sessions are confronted with a profound task of discernment as they do the cost-benefit analysis for their congregations.

- You have to balance the need people have to be with each other and the worry about the erosions of steady habits and rhythms of worship, fellowship, and service—against the ruinous presence of a pernicious pathogen whose threat continues.

- You have to assess what resources and energy are present in your particular household of faith to meet simultaneously the needs of those who yearn to be together—and of those who know they cannot return to face-to-face gatherings until a vaccine has been made available and effective therapies have been developed.
- You have to estimate whether an invitation to regather will not only be joyfully received by some—but might also encourage others for whom gathering would be unwise to put themselves at risk.

You are making your discernment in varying ways as you assess the circumstances of your churches and communities, and you continue in our prayers as you do so.

In our last communication, we focused on best practices as opportunities for face-to-face gatherings outdoors were being explored in some of our churches. But as we move further into Fall, gathering outside becomes less practical and some of you will opt for gathering indoors as the weather cools. The Task Force recommends that Sessions and their Pastoral Staff use caution and be continually mindful of the health of those in their congregations, offering these suggestions of good practices for meeting indoors.

- **Ascertain the best possible ventilation and air flow that can be attained in your space**, including upgrading air filters wherever possible.
- **Pay attention to time.** Evidence continues to point to the fact that prolonged experience of indoor air—despite the best ventilation we might provide—can still pose a heightened risk.
- **Carefully discern the maximum number of persons that can be accommodated in a particular space.** While the CDC and NC State recommended numbers of 50 outdoors and 25 indoors are not legally binding for houses of worship, it is important to remember that these guidelines provide important medical and scientific best practices given the nature of Covid 19's patterns of spread.
- **Err on side of increased social distancing** as arrangements are made for seating for participants.
- **Avoid congregational singing** because of the likelihood of aerosol transmission of the virus.
- **Ask everyone to wear a mask** unless undertaking a speaking role in a service.
- **Make sure no items used in a service (bulletins, Bibles, etc.) are touched by multiple hands.**
- **Provide instructions and modeling regarding appropriate greetings** upon arriving and departing.
- **Devise means for liturgical acts such as passing the peace and receiving the offering** that do not require touching.
- **Ensure that frequent sanitation is practiced in all areas**, including restrooms.
- **Remember to provide alternatives** for those who cannot participate face-to-face.
- **Commit to flexibility**, backing away from face-to-face gatherings quickly if adverse circumstances occur.

While most of these practices may be associated with gathering for worship, they also apply to other occasions like committee meetings, Bible studies and other gatherings that happen beyond the worship time. Even congregations attempting face-to-face worship may choose to continue to gather via Zoom or other virtual formats for other congregational events, thereby limiting needs for increased sanitizing of a church facility

We remind congregational members of what we said above about the difficult discernment Sessions are necessarily making. Thus, we encourage you to support those decisions during these difficult days. No

decision is made lightly or without the care of each individual's health in mind. Further, support your pastors as they seek to provide worship that includes everyone, supporting ways to avoid having to do everything twice—once for those who might gather and again for those participating remotely. Encourage them to be in touch with the Presbytery Office about resources that may help.

Finally, please note the change of date for the Presbytery meeting which was originally scheduled for October 24, and now has been moved to Tuesday, October 27. This meeting will be virtual and details will be sent out soon about how to register for (and thus gain access to) the meeting.

Grace and Peace,

Blake Daniel, Dot Descieux, Dick Larson, Whit Malone, Marcia Mount Shoop, Lauren Vanacore, Byron Wade, Billy Robinson, and Cam Murchison