



*Continuing the work of Jesus.
Peacefully. Simply. Together.*

MID-ATLANTIC DISTRICT
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

May 15, 2020

Dear Mid-Atlantic Pastors, Congregational Chairpersons, and Members:

Greetings. Every day you are very much in my thoughts and prayers that God's Spirit will sustain you through this coronavirus time.

Our district leadership team is recommending that congregations continue not to gather in buildings through June 30. As Mid-Atlantic district comprises five states and D.C., the leadership team also asks congregations to do no less than follow the reopening guidelines of their particular jurisdiction. Links to state reopening policies and guidelines follow my letter.

Since MD as of 5 pm this evening is allowing limited reopening including churches at no more than fifty percent capacity following social distancing guidelines including the use of masks, why would the leadership team and I recommend that congregations not gather in the church through June 30? A biblical admonition that has guided my thinking is, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others" (Ph 2:4). I believe in many things, and particularly in regard to reopening, the church should be a bit behind the world around us. Our congregational demographics tilt toward those most vulnerable to a negative outcome if they catch this virus, in other words those more likely to become seriously ill and die. The truth is that no one of any age is immune to negative and permanently damaging effects from covid 19. The biggest news story this past week has been the growing number of children suffering inflammatory disease from covid. I encourage us if we err to err on the side of caution, to hang on another month-and-a-half, and see where we are and what is known about this virus in the next month or so. The district leadership team will be meeting again on June 6 and following that meeting will communicate with our fifty-nine congregations their best discernment about reopening.

In the meantime, we need to plan for reopening. Some of the considerations must be:

Continuing social distancing – while family groups could sit together, there needs to be at least six feet between people.

Masks must be worn. Churches will need to have some on hand. What will be done if someone refuses to wear one?

Will we sing hymns and songs? While social distancing requires six feet of separation, scientists believe the virus can travel thirty feet. Singing expels breath more forcibly. Do we mouth hymns? What about the use of hymnals? Restaurants are transitioning to disposable menus.

No more greeting the pastor at the sanctuary door. No more shaking hands with each other. No more bumping elbows – that's zero distance.

Will we be able to have congregational meals? I don't think so for now. What about our beloved gathering and conversation times before and after services?

Thorough cleaning will need to be done after every gathering.

This is all going to take a lot of thought, communication with, interpretation to, and education of members, and sometime we're going to forget, reach out, touch, and then what?

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“Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

In the meantime, let us:

Continue to pray for potent therapies and vaccines for covid.

Continue to reach out, and I commend our congregations and ministers for ministries and mission in this direction, toward those whose lives have been devastated through job loss, illness of themselves or loved ones, the death of a dear one, to those who wake up wondering how they’re going to feed their family or pay the rent or mortgage and keep a roof over their heads. To whom is God calling us to extend our ministry and mission during this time?

Keep in touch with and care for the members of our congregations, mindful that some have been battered beyond discouragement into the depths of depression.

Find ways to care for your pastor(s). Although most pastors are working from home this has been the opposite of a vacation for pastors. Most pastors I know have been working more rather than less, with the stresses of having to learn whole new ways of relating, communicating, preaching and leading worship, caring for their people, and new computer and IT skills. They’ve been tremendously committed, courageous, and creative, I feel. Like many of us who have been transitioned from office to home it seems like everything I do takes more time, attention, and energy than previously. Please ask your pastor what they need, care for them as they care for you, and pray for them.

Pray for those who are sick, in hospital, for the protection of caregivers, for doctors and nurses and room cleaners and chaplains and the effectiveness of their ministrations.

Keep gathering together and worshiping God and caring for your sisters and brothers and neighbors in all the creative ways you have been since the start of this pandemic. I am humbled by and amazed at the congregational and ministerial creativity that has emerged during this time of social distancing, and at the way so many of us “old dogs have learned, or are learning new [IT] tricks.” I’m a little behind in the learning of new IT tricks, but I’m inspired to get with the program.

Sustain and continue to encourage the faithful and generous stewardship and financial support that congregations and the district are experiencing through this time.

Identify ministries that have developed during coronavirus time that should continue after “reopening.”

Keep the faith that God is with us, God is good, and that if our hearts are turned and tuned toward God, God will bring good out of this dark time. “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Ps 46:1). As Mr. Rogers advised, “Look for the helpers.”

I love you. Call or email me if and when you need me.

“Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

God bless and keep you,

Gene

Gene Hagenberger
Mid-Atlantic District Executive Minister

State Reopening Policies and Guidelines

MARYLAND

<https://governor.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Gatherings-SIXTH-AMENDED-5.13.20.pdf>

Religious facilities pg. 4

<https://governor.maryland.gov/recovery/>

<https://governor.maryland.gov/coronavirus/>

VIRGINIA

<https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/12/854922448/virginia-to-partially-reopen-this-week-but-not-in-the-areas-closest-to-d-c> mentions churches third paragraph after picture

<https://www.nbc12.com/2020/05/08/gov-northam-expected-layout-guidelines-reopening-virginia/>

<https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/coronavirus/>

<https://www.governor.virginia.gov/media/governorvirginiagov/executive-actions/EO-62-and-Order-of-Public-Health-Emergency-Four---Jurisdictions-Temporarily-Delayed-From-Entering-Phase-One-in-Executive-Order-61-and-Permitted-to-Remain-in-Phase-Zero-Northern-Virginia-Region.pdf>

WASHINGTON DC

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2020/05/08/dc-reopen-coronavirus-faq/>

<https://coronavirus.dc.gov/node/1477371>

<https://coronavirus.dc.gov/>

PENNSYLVANIA

<https://www.pa.gov/guides/responding-to-covid-19/#PhasedReopening>

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html>

https://www.heraldmillmedia.com/news/special/coronavirus/franklin-county-commissioners-divided-on-move-to-yellow-phase/article_a68c3940-bf68-57a6-ad3e-c3f772670218.html

https://www.heraldmillmedia.com/news/special/coronavirus/fulton-county-added-to-state-yellow-list/article_6e12a5a6-f8f3-5c98-bff2-adc4d6b7f7a8.html

WEST VIRGINIA

<https://governor.wv.gov/Pages/The-Comeback.aspx>

Churches under week 2 – about 2/3 down

DELAWARE

<https://governor.delaware.gov/delawares-recovery/>