



## THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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Greetings in the Name of the Risen Christ!

The ongoing public health crisis with the spread of COVID-19 threatens our physical health, economic health, and our spiritual health. As I have stated before, I was convinced back in March that the closing of churches for public gatherings and worship would be for a short time. Unfortunately, that has not been the case. At times it seemed that we were close to being able to reopen our churches in Dallas County. However, the recent spike in the number of new cases per day has necessitated the decision to remain closed for worship through July.

For some it appears that our churches are closed, but they are not closed. Worship continues in ways to which many of us were previously unaccustomed. As a result, the churches of the North Texas Conference of The United Methodist Church are reaching and engaging more people than pre-COVID-19. New small groups, opportunities for spiritual growth, and mission engagement by thousands have widened our witness for Christ and broadened and deepened our compassion for our neighbors.

Through these past weeks, the focus on our neighbors has been and continues to be the biggest concern in my daily prayers to God.

The familiar exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees in Matthew 22:37-39 about what was the greatest commandment culminated in these words of Jesus:

<sup>37</sup> He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” <sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

The decision to not yet reopen churches for public gatherings is rooted in these two simple commandments of Jesus. The people of the North Texas Conference of The United Methodist Church will love others as much or even more than we love ourselves. We will continue to worship virtually and serve others as Christ has called us to do. We will do no harm to our neighbors or our families.

Who are our neighbors? The clergy of the NTC are my neighbors. The laity who are members or constituents of the NTC local churches are my neighbors. The persons for whom we have cared during these months are my neighbors. And the people to whom God wants to introduce us so we may introduce them to God are my neighbors. And all of those whom I have named are also your neighbors.

When we do gather in person, we will wear masks. It’s not comfortable, and it can be somewhat warm. But it is an important way for us to love others, because if we all wear masks, then we are all welcome. All includes persons with conditions that require them to be very careful about their health; they also long to worship in person.

Later in July, the decision regarding reopening will be revisited. In the meantime, let’s commit to worship passionately and deeply. Let’s live with the hope that we will gather again physically. Let’s focus on our neighbors and not on ourselves. And let’s be grateful for all we do have and remember and pray for all who are not able to pray a prayer of gratitude as easily during these times. Let us allow the Holy Spirit to guide us and open our eyes and hearts to our neighbors.

Thank you for your faithfulness. God bless you.