



**The Synod of the Southwest  
The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)  
in New Mexico and Arizona  
5901 Wyoming Blvd., NE - #J-319  
Albuquerque, NM 87109  
(520) 791-9600 [www.synodsw.org](http://www.synodsw.org)**

Dear Siblings in Christ,

As we navigate through this time of uncertainty let us be reminded that our trust and faith lies in Jesus Christ, our Rock and our Salvation. Let us also remember that as we find ourselves in this uncertain time we are also travelling the Lenten journey of reflection and awareness of God's awesome power and love for the children and the world God created.

That is not to say that simply relying on that trust and faith alone will see us through this time of trial. Rather, it is a call to intentional action, particularly as we respond to the needs of our siblings that are most subject to the debilitating effects, in terms of health (physical and mental) and economic distress.

I am aware that many of our pastors and faith community leaders have already entered into discussions about how and whether to proceed with worship services this Sunday and beyond. How to engage in practices which minimize person-to-person spread of the Covid19 virus is also very much a topic of those conversations. Some are considering cancelling their normal church service routines, others are considering sanitation and hygiene methods to minimize exposure. In all cases, those who are ill, whose health is already compromised or who care for those who are, should refrain from attending church services and gatherings. And frankly, if entering a worship space would simply be uncomfortable and create anxiety, you also should feel free to refrain from entering our places of worship. God is with us whether we are gathered together in a church building or at home with family or even at home alone and we can always offer thanksgiving and praise to God regardless of where we may physically find ourselves.

In New Mexico, our Governor has declared a public health emergency and banned gatherings of 100 persons or more in public spaces and encouraged faith communities to consider refraining from holding religious services and gatherings. In Arizona, I am unaware whether the secular authorities have acted to address this crisis. The Archbishop of Santa Fe of the Roman Catholic Church today directed that all religious services in the churches within his jurisdiction are to cease until further notice and all of its schools closed.

The Synod Executive committee has met twice within the past two weeks to consider whether we should meet for our Spring Assembly and decided it was best to postpone that meeting into June. Likewise, we cancelled the training of General Assembly Commissioners to be held today and tomorrow.

We did this in an abundance of caution and concern for our siblings that would most likely have to travel by public conveyance to attend these gatherings.

We then considered how we might still gather, virtually, to enter into a time of prayer, lifting our corporate voice to God in thanksgiving, praise and with the knowledge that God is with us, always. To that end, we have decided that on March 28<sup>th</sup> we will join together by Zoom. More on the logistics will be forthcoming.

We considered the possibility of engaging in a virtual celebration of the Lord's Supper. Theologically and consistent with our own Church Constitution (the Book of Order), which provides very clear instruction on celebrating the Lord's Supper, the decision was not to do so, but to wait until we were all able to gather together again in one place, side by side, and experience the joy of sharing in this feast as a community.

But beyond the question of whether or not to hold church services or gatherings, we must consider how we will address the needs of those most vulnerable to this global pandemic within our faith communities. We must seek ways in which we will connect with them and offer assistance and assurance. In doing so, we must minimize the risk to ourselves and others in addressing an illness about which we know little.

The bottom line, as communities of faith, is that this is the time when we can seek innovative ways of caring for our communities and one another....virtual prayer circles, more regular calls to those homebound and ill....and providing alternative methods to "gather" to worship our God and give thanks for God's presence with us, beside us and in us.

In this time of trial, please avail yourselves of the information from your particular state's Department of Health and from the Center on Disease Control and Prevention for the most accurate information available about Covid19 and ways in which to minimize its impact in our lives, individually and corporately.

Sibling in Christ, this is not a time to panic nor to experience a sense of abandonment by our God. Rather, it is a time in which as the body of Christ we can exhibit Christ's care and concern for the vulnerable and in so doing know that God has not abandoned us and we shall not abandon one another.

I would ask, also, that if you plan to implement or wish to discuss innovative ways to serve our communities in both their worship of God and their care for one another, that you share those with the Synod Staff and we will share those with our wider community of faith. And if you wish to gather virtually but do not have the applications necessary to do so, that you also reach out to either me or Sharon and we will attempt to help you. By the same token, I have attached a document titled "Tips for congregations and councils who are considering cutting down on in-person meetings", which might be helpful as discussions proceed on how to respond to the Covid19 pandemic in our congregational and mid council context.

Finally, as we reach out to our God in prayer, please pray particularly for:

- The elderly and those in fragile health.
- First-line health care workers under stress as they meet unprecedented demand.
- The poor, people in low-wealth communities, and workers in the short-term and freelance economy, facing risks that include no paid sick leave, unavailable childcare, inadequate health care or lack of a savings cushion.
- The unhoused who have few choices for protecting shelter or health care access.
- Immigrants, parents and their children in detention centers that are crowded and lack sanitary conditions.
- People who are incarcerated, who may have no access or options to appropriate prevention or care.
- Indigenous community and village residents, especially if they live in isolated areas where health care and infrastructure may not have immediate resources to respond to a large-scale crisis.
- Our government and civic leaders who face difficult decisions in responding to this health crisis, that they may lead in a way that serves the best interests of the people who have entrusted them with such responsibility.

God's Peace to you and yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Conrad', written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Conrad

*Thanks to Andy James from the Presbytery of New Hope for these [tips for congregations and councils who are considering cutting down on in-person meetings in response to the coronavirus alarm](#):*

- **Check your contact list and communications.** Verify that you have current contact information for all members and regular attendees at your church. Go over the protocol for communicating the cancellation of worship or other events to these persons and the broader public. Even smaller congregations that depend on family networks may want to make sure that everyone has a “buddy” who is not part of their own family.
- **Make sure you have remote and shared access to key information.** Put critical electronic files in cloud-based storage so key leaders can access information from home. Know how to access the church’s voicemail system or answering machine remotely in case important messages are left there or you need to update the recording to reflect a cancellation or closure. Set up an electronic distribution list through a database or distribution service (i.e. Constant Contact or Mailchimp) so that access is not limited to a single person.
- **Consider electronic conferencing options to keep people connected.** The church’s ministry does not have to stop if in-person gatherings have to be canceled for health and safety reasons. Explore ways of gathering for worship, prayer, and/or Bible study via conferencing technology like Zoom (videoconferences) or FreeConferenceCall. These have the added benefit of providing options for bringing people together in our increasingly complex lifestyles.
- **Set up giving online.** Contributions to the church can continue even when worship is canceled or attendance diminished through any of several online giving options. Look for a service that integrates with your church’s database software or consider the [Presbyterian Foundation’s Online Giving Program](#), which offers low transaction fees, then encourage members to establish automatic recurring gifts.
- **Adopt rules for electronic meetings.** Sessions and other church committees can meet electronically via videoconference or teleconference if the church has adopted appropriate procedures for such in advance. Make sure your session’s manual of operations includes these provisions *before* you need to use them, even if you don’t have the technology yet!

*Thanks as well to Sue Krummel from the Presbytery of Chicago, who also offers thoughts about “the things you will want to talk about with your session and other leaders in your congregation.”*

- How will you continue to include those who are ill or afraid or following the recommendations or requirements of governmental officials in worship and other spiritual practices of your congregation? Do you have a way to produce a video of worship? Are you on Facebook live? Do you post your worship services to YouTube? Does your pastor post the sermon or prayers? This is a good time to increase your online presence so that all of your members and friends can stay connected to your group spiritual practices over the next weeks and months.
- Have you considered holding smaller events as Zoom meetings or by Skype or Facetime? For instance, do you have a Bible study that meets regularly? If it becomes

important for people not to meet in person, have you helped them find a way to continue that practice electronically?

- What about pastoral care? This is the time to remind your deacons, elders, Stephen's Ministers, and staff that they should not make pastoral visits if they are themselves feeling unwell. This is also a time to think about how to help people feel the care offered by your congregation without physical contact; do you have a robust ministry of sending written notes, making phone calls, and contacting your shut-in or ill members or those experiencing loss by electronic means?
- Do you have a way for members to make contributions electronically? The best way to do that is to have people set up electronic funds transfer so that their contributions are made on a regular basis. (Your bank or the Presbyterian Foundation can help you with this.) Is there a place on your website where people can make an online contribution? Can people contribute by text? This is the time to improve all of these systems for your congregation.
- But perhaps the most important thing your leaders can be doing now is planning about how you will get people back. For the next few weeks or even months, it is likely that there will either be smaller congregations present in sanctuaries; or we will make the decision or be ordered to cancel worship altogether. People will find out that there are other things to do on Sunday morning; they will find other ways to meet their spiritual needs. The trend in this country is already away from worship attendance. What kind of event will you sponsor, what kind of special worship will you have, what kind of celebration will you have to welcome people back to church when this is over? And that is what we need to remember—it will be over.