



Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Greetings to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

*Who will separate us from the love of Christ?*

*Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?*

*... For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (from Romans 8:35-39)*

### **First, Blessings and Commendations to You from the Leader Team and COM**

The Merriam-Webster dictionary word-of-the-year is “Pandemic.” It is closely followed by “Unprecedented.” We commend you for your faithful – and extraordinary – ministry. You keep going. You adapt. You provide authentic worship. You serve your communities in mission. You are doing amazing work! We see the sweep of your efforts. We thank you.

### **The Reality: Covid-19 is Surging at the Highest Level of the Pandemic and Getting Worse**

All it takes is one glance at any news source. Covid-19 infections and deaths are rising daily. Health experts fear a “surge upon a surge” over the holiday season. Community spread is rampant, meaning many people diagnosed have no idea how they got it. Hospitals fear they will be completely overwhelmed by Christmas. Many of us have been directly impacted by Covid-19, or personally know people who are. No one knows exactly what is ahead, when vaccinations might be widely available or how we get to a more “normal” future. We do know we can expect a long, difficult winter. On December 2, 2020 Chair of the CDC Robert Redfield said to the US Chamber of Commerce: *“The reality is December and January, and February are going to be rough times. I actually believe they're going to be the most difficult time in the public health history of this nation, because of the stress to the health system. I do think, unfortunately, before we see February, we could be close to 450,000 Americans dead from this virus.”*

### **Don't Let Up on Your Response! Support is Available!**

Some of our churches are holding in-person worship and other activities. Some continue to worship online or over the phone. Some permit small group or mission-critical activities. Some buildings are closed entirely with all staff working from home. Many have had to pivot repeatedly. The Presbytery Leader Team and Connecting Our Ministry Commission (COM) are available to assist with your planning. We can help find the resources you need.

**All pastors and congregational leaders are invited to join the weekly Zoom Group for consultation and support. It is held Mondays at 10am.** Contact the presbytery office for logins

or any information you need. In addition, the Board of Pensions (BoP) has ramped up the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), which offers free counseling and consultation to employees covered by the BoP. We say it again: This is really tough. We have no choice but to press on. You are not alone.

### **Recommendation from the Leader Team and COM: It is Critical to Consider Suspending In-Person Indoor Gatherings Immediately through February**

In a joint meeting on December 3, 2020 the Leader Team and COM unanimously voted to advise our congregations and pastors to consider suspending indoors in-person worship immediately through February 2021. This matters now due to the grim rise in infections and deaths, and the overtaxed resources of hospitals. In addition, as we come into the winter months, we enter the cold and flu season on top of the projected holiday surge. There is no way to tell if coughing, sneezing, and aching are symptoms of a minor cold or Covid-19. When the usual weather uncertainties are added to the mix, churches continuing in-person worship are accumulating multitudes of risk factors.

If you plan now to suspend in-person indoor worship and many activities through February, this will free the energy that goes into continual decision-making on closures for long-range planning, hopefully as conditions improve. This recommendation is not a mandate, unless PA or the CDC issue a shelter-in-place order. It is the STRONG recommendation of the Leader Team and COM.

At least 13 of our congregations that were engaging in some form of in-person worship have already returned to online or phone-based worship. Several congregations that are currently worshipping in-person on Sundays have cancelled their Christmas Eve services to limit crowds.

### **Counsel if Continuing In-Person Worship and Activities**

If your congregation is continuing with in-person worship and activities, here is our advice:

- **Be diligent in enforcing CDC advice:** Practice Social Distancing of at least 6 feet; Keep Sanitizing, Disinfecting, Handwashing; Vigorous enforcement of face mask policies.
- **Mandatory Face Masks:** Pennsylvania has issued a new face mask advisory that **REQUIRES** face masks to be worn inside when gathering with anyone not in the immediate household. Attendees at Worship services and other activities **MUST wear Face Masks. The state order prohibits removing face masks, even when seated in the sanctuary or other rooms.** Your presbytery leaders believe that we honor Christ, who calls us to love one another, when we wear face masks to protect not only ourselves, but the community.
- **Face Mask Provision for Worship Leaders:** There is a provision in the face mask order for worship leaders to remove face masks, to be heard by those with hearing limitations. There should be 20 feet (and/or plexiglass) between an unmasked leader and other attendees. See the links below for more information.

- **Limiting Risk:** Keep services of worship below 45 minutes. Limit spoken congregational responses to “half-voice” behind masks. Singing is not recommended, but any singing should also be in a quiet voice to avoid aerosols. Consult with a heating/air conditioning professional about the best solutions for airflow and risk mitigation. Communion should be postponed or offered with pre-sealed or pre-packaged elements. Do not pass offering plates. Social distance and Sanitize!
- **Every session holding in-person worship and activities needs to prepare their plan to return to not-in-person arrangements.** It is entirely possible that you may need to pivot with little time for new plans. Mandatory reasons to close might come locally—if you need to quarantine your building because someone reports infection. The necessity to close might come for all of us if the state and CDC issue new guidelines recommending closure due to worsening conditions. With Advent and Christmas upon us, it is important to decide now what your plans would be.
- **Information from CDC and Pennsylvania – Attendance Limits now 10% of Maximum Capacity**  
[CDC Guidance for Communities of Faith](#)  
[PA Updated Order Requiring Universal Face Coverings](#) – required for all attendees at all times  
[PA Mitigation and Enforcement Order of November 27](#) – section 11 explains exclusions for communities of faith for attendance limits during worship services. Attendance limits of 10% of maximum occupancy in section 9 apply to meetings, classes, and other gatherings. In other words, it is suggested but not required that worship attendance be no more than 10% of maximum occupancy. (This was changed on November 27 down from 20%).

### **Announcing the Donegal Winter Festival of Worship! Begins with Presbytery-wide Service of Lessons and Carols for December 27, 2020 and Continues through February 28, 2021**

During the Covid Summer of 2020, the Presbytery sponsored a Festival of Worship. One congregation hosted worship – either pre-recorded or livestreamed – each week. Other congregations joined as needed, with presbytery coordination. This gave pastors the chance to take vacation or study leave, without needing to arrange pulpit supply, along with all the tech requirements to record and post worship. It went well, and we are going to offer it again!

#### **What Do We Need to Do to Host Worship for the Winter Festival of Worship?**

To host worship, the congregation needs to offer online worship available on Sunday morning. This worship service can be pre-recorded or livestreamed. If you'd like to host, please sign up with your available Sundays on this form [www.surveymonkey.com/r/WinterFestivalofWorship](http://www.surveymonkey.com/r/WinterFestivalofWorship)  
**We are also looking for pre-recorded music for the Festival of Lessons and Carols. Use the same form to let us know what you have.**

#### **How Do We Sign Up to Attend Worship with the Host Congregation?**

In order to register your congregation to attend on your chosen Sundays, simply fill out this SurveyMonkey form [www.surveymonkey.com/r/AttendWinterFestivalWorship](http://www.surveymonkey.com/r/AttendWinterFestivalWorship) This will let the

presbytery and the host congregation know you are planning to join them and allow your congregation to be greeted by name. If you need to have your congregation join at the last minute and haven't signed up, that's fine too. The list of host congregations, and how to access the worship service will be posted on the presbytery Winter Festival of Worship section on the presbytery web page. Every Thursday this information will be sent out to pastors and clerks of sessions by email as well. Any Questions? Contact Executive Presbyter Erin Cox-Holmes, [erincoxholmes@gmail.com](mailto:erincoxholmes@gmail.com) or Stated Clerk Michael Wilson, [michael@donegalpby.org](mailto:michael@donegalpby.org) for more information!

### Care for Your Pastor and Staff

The Leader Team and COM recommend that the Session consult with pastors and staff before the end of the year to make sure that all 2020 vacation and Study Leave time was used. If not, consider allocating that time for 2021, perhaps during the months of January and February, when you can take advantage of the Festival of Worship. Encourage each other as we strive to maintain health during these challenges.

### Our Encouragement to You

Stay the Course. Stay Safe. Stay Sane. Cultivate Hope. Curate Vision for the Future. Laugh. And Cry. Be Gentle with yourselves and each other. Be in touch as needed. And remember that nothing can separate us with the Love of God in Jesus Christ.

God bless you and your ministry,

On behalf of the Presbytery of Donegal Leader Team and Connecting Our Ministry Commission



**Rev. Dr. Erin Cox-Holmes**  
Executive Presbyter



**Rev. Dr. Michael Wilson**  
Stated Clerk



**Rev. Matthew Randolph**  
Co-Moderator of the Leader Team



**Rev. Sarah Kneier**  
Co-Moderator of the Leader Team



**Rev. Dr. Steven Fritz**  
Connecting Our Ministries Commission Chair