



"The way forward will not be a matter of following a timetable,
but of faithfully discerning the signs of the times, and responding accordingly."
-Resetting Expectations, Wisconsin Council of Churches

As I write, we are still in the red zone. The coronavirus continues to pose significant risk in Pennsylvania. All of the counties in which our churches are located remain under the governor's stay-at-home mandate. Thankfully, our prevention efforts have bent the curve - in many areas the spread of the disease has slowed down. And from what I see, essential elements, such as worship, care for each other, and care for our communities continue, in new forms, across our presbytery. In many places, financial giving remains strong, and our people are also showing generosity with gifts of food, masks, and other essentials needed by our neighbors. [Here's](#) a 5-minute video showing some of the faces and activities of Carlisle Presbytery congregations during this COVID-19 season. You are welcome to use it in worship or on Social Media, as a way of expressing our unity, in Christ.

Eventually, we will enter the yellow zone. Earlier this week, I participated in a conference call with Dr. Rachel Levine, Secretary of Health, who spoke to leaders of faith communities across the commonwealth. Dr. Levine described the protocols for operating in the yellow zone: Gather with no more than 25 people. Practice social distancing. Wear masks. Wash hands. Tele-work as much as possible.

Read that list again. Even in the yellow zone, much of what we do in church will need to be modified. [Here's](#) a list of questions our churches should consider, before returning to our buildings. And [this resource](#), published by the Wisconsin Council of Churches, describes protocols churches may consider in various phases of re-opening church buildings. Keeping our congregations safe and modeling leadership in our communities that reflects our commitment to "the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God" (F-1.0304) will require careful discernment on the part of our Sessions and a cooperative spirit among members of our congregations.

Now is the time to begin those conversations, but I believe it's important to pump the brakes and take our time with this discernment. Yes, we immediately shifted our practices at the outset of the pandemic, and I'm confident that when the time is right, Sessions will step up with safety protocols that align with the recommendations of health experts. ***But let's not rush it.*** At this point, I'm advising that Sessions pause to consider what it could

look like to establish a rhythm of congregational life that can flex with changing conditions (the ebb and flow of the disease, a mix of physical and digital expression), for the foreseeable future. With the high likelihood of a resurgence of COVID-19 cases as people congregate again, I am urging us to exercise restraint. To learn more about the risks we assume when we bring people together, [read this](#).

The pandemic has put us into the throes of an adaptive challenge like we've never seen before. ***We're not going back to normal, because normal has disappeared. And we're not picking up where we left off, because we're in a place we've never been before.*** But we are in good company: with Abraham and Sarah, with Moses and the Israelites, with the exiles in Babylon, with the disciples after Jesus' resurrection...called to ground our lives in God today, and to follow God's leadership into a future not of our own making. So, it's also worth taking the time to stop and consider what would help us discern God's lead, re-making us for life that gives expression to the gospel AFTER the pandemic.

This opens up what I'm calling 'in the meantime' questions. As we consider practices and protocols for the day when we can gather in person again, I hope Sessions and congregations will take time with questions like these:

- What are we learning, through experimentation and adaptation, about ourselves and about our lives, in God?
- What practices have we found most life-giving during this pandemic ***and why?***
- What underlying values and/or biblical and theological commitments are reflected in these practices?
- What would you now say are the essentials, when it comes to your church's expression of the gospel?
- What could you permanently let go, and what do you want to take with you into the new world that is rapidly upon us?
- In the midst of disconnection and isolation, what have the necessary virtual shifts shown you about real-life connection, companioning, and Christian community?
- As difficult as this has been, what do these disruptions make possible?
- What are the divine opportunities, when neighbors are out of their routines and churches are out of their buildings?
- Who are your thought partners - with whom might you re-think and re-imagine the way we are church?

- Given what you're seeing now, to what is God calling your congregation, on the other side of this pandemic?

In a couple of weeks we'll be in the red zone of Pentecost. Although we have no way of knowing what coming months will bring, may the Spirit poured out upon us, bring hope and healing, for us, for our churches, and for all of creation.

Blessings,

Cheryl D. Galan, Interim Executive Presbyter