



GREAT PLAINS ANNUAL CONFERENCE of The United Methodist Church

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To the clergy and laity of the Great Plains Conference,

The grace and peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit in this time of concern, yet also innovation, brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

I wish to thank the clergy who attended a virtual communion livestream Monday, March 23. The purpose was to model for our clergy how they might conduct Holy Communion together while your congregations are worshipping apart from one another. I'll share more information about that a little later in this letter.

I am writing today to summarize some of the key points I shared with the clergy.

First, I want to say thank you. Amid difficult circumstances, we have seen churches use technology to worship and bring together small groups. We have seen people checking on their neighbors and finding new ways to reach their communities.

Indeed, we may find after this time of seclusion is over that we are being the church more now than we have been in quite some time. I want to commend you for the new ways you are reaching your communities. We are much like the first-century church and many of the growing church movements in the world that function without buildings.

I want you to know that the annual conference staff is doing all that it can to provide resources and support to our local churches — all 1,000 across Kansas and Nebraska.

- District Superintendents are encouraging community and connection by convening virtual conversations to provide you with pastoral care, to mobilize mutual support, information sharing, and encouragement for mission
- The Administrative Services staff is developing resources to help churches work through your questions on financial management as well as handling staffing issues.
- The Clergy Excellence department is encouraging clergy to gather virtually each week for mutual support and will send out a brief survey that will help us provide the support you need.
- The Congregational Excellence department is developing resources daily that are being added to the conference website, and it is crafting suggestions for worship online during Holy Week, Easter and beyond.
- The Communications department is aiding congregations by providing instruction and consultation for AV-related ministry, while also working to secure the best pricing for distance communication tools such as Zoom.

I am acutely aware of the enormous financial challenges you are experiencing in your local churches, and I am also aware that you personally may be experiencing stress over our uncertain state of affairs.

Therefore, in consultation with Scott Brewer, our conference treasurer, and the Rev. Zach Anderson, chair of the Council on Finance and Administration, I am issuing a moratorium on the submission of conference mission shares through June 1, 2020, effective immediately, to help alleviate your mounting financial concerns and to help stabilize your local church's financial health.

At this point, it is a missional imperative that your local church has the financial capacity to sustain its mission and its operating costs.

Other key financial considerations include:

- Pastors' salaries — Our Administrative Services, CFA, and conference Board of Pensions will develop qualifying guidelines to ensure that clergy receive minimum compensation in accordance with their clergy status in the event that congregations cannot fulfill their compensation obligation due to reduced income and the absence or exhaustion of undesignated reserves.



- Pensions — If your congregation is having difficulty covering its pension billings, it is very important that you continue to at least pay any billings that come from payroll deductions like pastors' UMPIP, Roth IRA, dental, vision, life, accidental, or critical illness. Those amounts are federally regulated and need to be paid in a timely manner. If a church is not able to pay the complete benefits bill for the pastor, it should include a note to the conference stating it is paying only the payroll deductions so our staff can record and handle it accordingly.
- Managing debt — Speak with your lenders and creditors. Ask for a moratorium on your mortgage payments and other debt payments. Seek to negotiate an absolute moratorium for the next three to six months, not just a deferment of interest.

My meeting with the clergy focused on me leading a brief communion service from our video studio in the Topeka office with our pastors taking part online, just as you may want to do during this time of sheltering in place. Clergy have been provided guidelines, but in summary:

- Rules for who can perform the sacrament are still in place.
- Try to have bread and juice available at home for when your pastor leads a time of communion, but understand that saltines and water are perfectly acceptable.
- The communion service should be done "live." Doing so by recording takes away from what is already a somewhat divided experience of celebrating the mystery of Christ's life, death and resurrection.

Above all, we want you to stay healthy. I can't stress enough the need to abide by the "shelter-in-place" protocol. We shelter in place for our own well-being and the well-being of our neighbor. Most of the people who contract the virus do so from an asymptomatic person. We must act as if we have the virus. In this way we follow our first General Rule as United Methodists to "do no harm."

Finally, I want to share a word about General Conference, Annual Conference, and Jurisdictional Conference. General Conference 2020, as we know, has been postponed until further notice due to international travel bans and group-gathering restrictions. The Council of Bishops in consultation with the Commission on General Conference and the Jurisdictional secretaries and College of Bishops presidents, will release the dates for General Conference 2021 soon.

Our annual conference scheduled for May 27-31 is still uncertain. We are working with our conference chancellor and a telecommunications provider to explore the possibility of holding an abbreviated teleconference annual conference to care for business items in need of immediate attention.

As far as we know, appointments will move forward as scheduled and will begin, July 1, 2020. The clergy session that approves the recommendations and the ordination service for those recommended by the Conference Board of Ordained ministry will take place when the annual conference is convened.

Conversations between Jurisdictional secretaries and College of Bishops presidents are in process to determine a date for jurisdictional conferences, eight weeks after the General Conference.

As for Easter, plan on gathering as a church community at the first opportunity after the group-gathering bans have been lifted. Whenever we gather, it will be Easter for us.

Friends, we have been called by Christ to lead the Church in mission in this unprecedented time. Our ancestors of the faith walked through similar shadowy valleys in their times. The church across the ages has lived through persecutions, famines, pestilence, and wars. These were crystallizing moments that reminded the church of her mission and her relationship with God and their surrounding world. This present moment will refine and redefine us as disciples of Jesus Christ and as the church called to join God in mission.

Peace,

Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr.