

Dear Grace UMC Family of Alamogordo & Tularosa,

*Do no harm. Do only good. Stay in love with God.* Those three rules from the late 1700s have guided the people called Methodists for centuries, and they continue to guide us now as we navigate what being the church looks like in a COVID-19 world. We've been *doing no harm* and *doing only good* in the way we've not only been abiding by all local laws and recommendations, but by leading the way in all of this by suspending gatherings and moving to online worship two full Sundays before any stay-at-home instruction or quarantines happened back in March. This has not been a reaction out of fear. Rather, this is all because we love one another and we love our neighbors, and people who follow Jesus should be the very first to take such action. We've also *stayed in love with God* in the ways that we've each continued in our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness for Christ and His Church even though it has looked vastly different than what we were doing just a few short months ago. Yes, it's very clear to me that the ministry of this church continues in a powerful way!

However, with the possibility of loosened local restrictions in the future, we must be very careful not to give in to a rush of excitement, but rather continue in the way of Christ, which is a way of grace, peace, patience, and an overwhelming desire to love each other and those outside our walls first and foremost, even if it costs us. So, what are we going to do? Well, we're going to continue to *do no harm*, to *do only good*, and to *stay in love with God*.

Just like you, your Leadership Board and I are waiting to see what news may come from the Governor's Office later this week regarding any potential changes to the current stay-at-home instruction. We don't know what changes she will announce, if any at all. So, at this very moment, the plans for worship and other church activities for this Sunday, and for the foreseeable future, is what it has been for the past two months: online worship only, all other in-person church activities are suspended, and staff will be doing as much work from home as possible. If we see that restrictions are being lifted to a degree where we can start to consider in-person worship again, we will consider just that. But, *always* at the forefront of that consideration will be that we do so in as safe and healthy a way as possible. We will take a patient and deliberate path forward to ensure that our sanctuary worship experience is truly a safe experience for all, which means it will take us time to phase back in to sanctuary worship. Again, we're awaiting New Mexico's recommendations and guidelines on re-opening before we finalize our own plans, so until we have more details about local restrictions we are not in a position right now to make any concrete plans of our own. In this context we find ourselves in, we are called to be a people who operate safely and in accordance with official local policy. Once our own phases of re-entry are developed, we will be sure to communicate them to you as quickly as possible.

As you can tell, this is going to be a slow, deliberate, and patient process for all of us. And because of this patient process we foresee that the earliest we could possibly be back in our sanctuaries for worship, in the best-case scenario, will be sometime in June. And remember, this

will only happen if local policies allow it, if we can safely live into those new policies, and if the Leadership Board feels we have a safe and healthy path forward.

I want to close by reminding everyone that this is not some sort of “second best” ministry. No, this can still be ministry at its best, and it should be ministry at its best! Remember that for the first few hundred years of the Church all they had for ministry were these three things: (1) The faithful teaching of the Gospel message (some from letters written in prison cells), (2) the faithful worship of individuals and families only gathering in small house groups and not in sanctuaries, and (3) trust that God would provide divine encounters through the mundane, ordinary lives of everyday Jesus followers—they didn’t have powerful choral anthems to rouse their spirits (as powerful as those are), they only had the Holy Spirit. Bottom line: our greatest resource is not our property—it isn’t our sanctuaries in Alamogordo or Tularosa. Our greatest resources are the Gospel message, our continued spiritual presence with one another, and God’s promise of presence with us. Centuries ago, and with only these three things, the Church grew at its greatest pace ever!

And guess what, we have those same things today! We have them in the way that I pray you continue to receive faithful teaching from me on a regular basis and through your own devotional lives. We have them in the way we’re still able to worship in our homes. And we have them in the way we’re discovering that it doesn’t take a Sunday morning in the sanctuary to be the Church, but that you can both *see* Jesus and *be* Jesus anywhere and everywhere. These aren’t just temporary lessons that we’ll have no use of in the future. These are lessons we should all carry with us for the rest of our life in ministry together, for the world has changed, and the way we minister in this transformed world must change as well. But even in the midst of these changes, the smallest and in the most drastic, whatever changes come our way, we will continue to be the Church through it all, for *best of all... God is with us!*

*Rev. Kelly McCuaig*