

Dear Beloved Friends and Members of The United Methodist Family,

Thank you for your faithful witness, prayers and patience as we continue to embrace social distancing and spiritual connection with an abundance of caution. In his briefing on Friday, May 1, Governor Holcomb shared his guidance for how Indiana could get “back on track” in the weeks ahead. The Governor took great care to emphasize that his plan represents a “measured” path with five stages to exercise caution and wisdom along the road to what some may consider a new normal.

The Governor has deferred to churches and leaders of churches to use wise judgement on best ways to resume gathering for worship and ministry in the weeks ahead. The state plan lists specific guidance for churches which can be found at www.backontrack.in.gov.

What about our work and worship as United Methodists in Indiana? In a recent communication, as your Bishop I asked United Methodist churches not to plan to meet before May 17. **We believe it is still wise to plan “in person” worship no sooner than June 14.** Further, in concert with the state’s guidance regarding protecting those among us who may be more vulnerable, 65 and older or those with health concerns, all congregations are encouraged to consider gathering plans that are more conservative than the ones allowed in stages 2-5 of the state plan.

The Governor’s guidance specifically recommends that churches continue to conduct as many activities as possible remotely. We are already doing livestream, virtual, drive in, and recorded services. We believe this is good ministry that can be missional, and we celebrate the efforts that have resulted in reaching our members and new people as well.

We do not believe it is prudent or necessary for the United Methodist churches in Indiana to recommend a “one size fits all” protocol for churches that are in different community contexts, have different membership, or have already been planning a process for return. Each setting will require discernment of its own. And, in fact, congregations with clergy who are themselves in the “vulnerable group” are asked to take that into consideration in their planning.

Here is what I know for sure:

- We have provided resources [here](#) that include a guide to consider as you plan to return to worship and in-building activities. Please communicate with your Conference Superintendent your plans and questions.
- We will continue to make recommendations and decisions based first on our General Rules as United Methodists, the first being to “Do no harm.”
- We believe no one should feel compelled to attend worship who does not feel safe or that they may be at higher risk for becoming sick.
- We know that persons can be asymptomatic and yet have COVID-19 and spread it to others. We know that at this time there is no vaccine or cure. We do know that

wearing a mask, washing hands and practicing disciplined social distancing has prevented more people from becoming ill.

The easing of government restrictions should not be equated with assurance that our public gatherings are safe. It is incumbent upon our local churches to make wise choices about how to manage coming back into the church space. We are no longer living in a time where we can go back to the way it used to be. We are now responsible for the well-being of ourselves and those with whom we will come in contact.

As clergy, you have been called to be shepherds—with the laity—of the flocks of Jesus followers with whom He has entrusted you. One shepherd penned Psalm 23, which is rich with honesty and assurance. “Even though I (We) walk through the darkest valley, we fear no evil for God is with us” (Psalm 23:4).

We do not know how long this pandemic will last, but we must not forget the word “through.” We will go through this valley together, with each other and the One who has said to His disciples, “I am the Good Shepherd.”

Please know that the Bishop and Extended Cabinet are praying for all of our pastors and congregations and ministry partners. You will be learning very soon about the ways we have been working diligently to provide a worship resource that can serve as a respite for our clergy on an upcoming Sunday morning.

As Easter People, we share the message of hope and the incarnational love of Jesus Christ with all the people we can, in all the ways we can in the days ahead. Be encouraged as we go through this valley together.

Bishop Julius C. Trimble
Resident Bishop
Indiana Conference of The United Methodist Church