

March 13, 2020

MEMORANDUM



**TO: Church Leaders in the New York Annual Conference**

**FROM: Thomas J. Bickerton, Resident Bishop**

**RE: A CRITICAL UPDATE FROM BISHOP THOMAS J. BICKERTON**

*“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” John 14:27*

**To Church Leaders in the New York Annual Conference:**

As all of you know, we are currently being called to serve in ways that require exceptional leadership and spiritual guidance to create and manage our COVID-19 (Coronavirus) response plans.

As one of the most diverse Conferences in the connection, there is rarely a “one-size-fits-all” response to any matter. However, in this instance, there is need for a uniform response.

The recent news that the World Health Organization has declared COVID-19 a pandemic and also the growing number of our churches that find themselves in the eye of this storm, means that we as leaders, must make difficult decisions.

This is one of those occasions where I, as your Episcopal Leader, must act immediately to protect our congregations and communities. Given the clear word from health officials across the country and our own local authorities, **I am asking that all United Methodist Churches in the New York Annual Conference not hold public services of worship for the next two weeks.**

There will be a separate advisory issued today with information for churches in need of guidance on streaming services, Zoom video, conference call options and grants that will be offered by the New York Annual Conference in order for local churches to acquire necessary licenses to conduct worship services and meetings remotely. We will also provide guidance for you to consider as you engage with groups that rent/utilize your facilities.

The need to minimize and “flatten the curve” of infection and curtail the spread of the Coronavirus is at a critical stage. Together, we must act to lessen the burden on health care personnel, systems and our people.

This clear reality has given rise to the need to make this decision. It has been made only after careful conversation with several informed people and deep personal reflection within myself. While this is a matter that will affect all of us emotionally and spiritually at the very core of who we are and what we do as called servants of Christ, it is a decision that must be made for the good of all the people we serve.

In the midst of the challenges associated with cancelling public services of worship, I strongly urge all our leaders to explore ways to continue providing words of hope and guidance when conveying the steps that must be taken in response to this crisis. Our role as spiritual leaders who provide a message of hope and possibility does not nor should not be quarantined. This is a time to explore and utilize new and creative ways of sharing the gospel in spite of the current circumstances around us.

In your planning, a key consideration is the responsibility we have to open our doors in creative ways and respond to the needs of the poor and marginalized. As the crisis escalates, we know that the least among us will arrive at a point of critical need.

We must maintain or begin to establish outreach ministries that are needed to assist our communities. I am asking that all of our churches and leaders explore ways that will allow us to serve as “Responding Stations,” able to receive the needy and offer essentials such as food, water, supplies and comfort.

I urge you to consider that not everyone in your community is able or willing to make the best or most prudent decisions in regard to this pandemic. And I am also sure that not everyone will understand the need for this decision to be made. However, these challenging days demand of us to take extraordinary actions. In light of this, I pray that you, as a leader, will take on the task of caring for the welfare and health of the congregation under your care and the community to which you have been appointed.

United Methodists have historically stood as a connectional church. Friends, we are in this together. As such, let us remember to pray for one another as we work to provide hope and healing in response to this virus.

The Journey Continues,...

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thomas J. Bickerton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left.