



# THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

## Dakotas-Minnesota Area

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Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ, our risen Lord.

Across our nation, many states are allowing more businesses to open with strict guidelines to minimize the risk of the spread of COVID-19. In this extended pandemic season, we are now at a point where the responsibility has shifted from Gov. Walz mandating that we stay at home to each person and organization determining how to stay safe based on recommendations offered to us.

Many congregations are already well on their way in developing plans to gradually return to in-person worship when it becomes safe to do so. It's clear that our new normal for the foreseeable future will involve wearing masks, staying six feet apart, frequently washing our hands, sanitizing common spaces, and assessing our personal risk and vulnerabilities as we engage in our daily activities.

What does all of this mean for our churches? Religious leaders in Minnesota, including myself, have been working with the governor's office to develop specific guidelines to re-open our houses of worship in smart and safe ways. In the meantime, the Minnesota Conference has developed a [Phased Re-Gathering Plan for Churches](#) based on the best information we have right now. I want to remind you that currently, groups of only 10 people or fewer are permitted to gather if each person maintains the proper distance. Drive-in worship services at which people remain their vehicles are also an option.

I urge you to go slow and keep your focus on the health and safety of your congregation and neighbors. I believe we will need to let go of trying to determine a precise date when we will be able fully return to public worship and recognize that we will instead need to be guided by a phased approach that unfolds over the course of the coming months as COVID-19 continues impact our state and communities to varying degrees. I know how painful this is when we

need each other more than ever and we long to see one another face-to-face. But as leaders of the church, we are called to care for the most vulnerable in our midst—and there is no way we can gather indoors, for an extended period of time, without exposing people in our communities to significant risk. What we know is that the virus is spread through the air, and we are contagious before we show symptoms. Gathering for celebrations such as weddings, funerals, corporate worship, and singing, are extremely high-risk activities. There have been several recent reports of congregations gathering for worship and then promptly closing after a coronavirus outbreak caused by an asymptomatic carrier. The stay-at-home order might have been lifted, but the virus is still very much with us.

Additionally, for most of our congregations, what you are able to offer online is of a higher quality than an in-person experience would be right now given the physical distancing requirements, restrictions on singing, recommendation to wear masks, and need for careful cleaning between all activities. Imagine a sanctuary where every family is six feet apart. There is no congregational singing. There are no hugs or handshakes. There is no mingling or fellowship time. The very things that people are longing for in gathering are too risky at this time. Many of our congregants, particularly the elderly, will be unlikely to accept the risks associated with in-person gatherings week after week if what they can experience at home is closer to the worship service they know and love.

I have heard the concerns. What about the church down the road that is open when we are not? Why can people shop at Walmart and Home Depot but not come to church? Of course being the church matters. But we are called to act not out of fear or competition or economic uncertainties but out of love and care for the whole. There is nothing stopping us from being the church we are called to be right now, in this moment, and we can do it in a way that ensures the safety of our people.

So, my friends, I ask you to keep on keeping on. Continue to innovate and seek new methods to help your congregation grow as disciples and serve your community. Invest in online worship and plan to make it an extension of your church even after we can resume in-person gatherings. Take advantage of these summer months by having some 10-person gatherings outdoors while

wearing masks and staying six feet apart, or by inviting people to drive-in worship. Plan to not return to in-person worship until the risk of infection is low and in adherence with all state guidelines. Keep developing and refining your congregation's plans for re-gathering based on our [Phased Re-Gathering Plan for Churches](#). Continue to encourage and engage in extravagant generosity because we are open for business, and your support is essential to our mission of making disciples of Jesus for the transformation of the world.

Thank you for your leadership and the tremendous ways you are adapting in this most challenging season. I know how difficult and exhausting it is to live and lead in this time of uncertainty. And yet, we do not do this by our own strength. We are held up by the power of the Holy Spirit, and I have every confidence that God will continue to lead us forward into a future with hope.

In Christ's love,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bruce R. Ough". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned centrally below the text "In Christ's love,".

Bishop Bruce R. Ough  
Resident Bishop, Dakotas-Minnesota Area  
The United Methodist Church