

***“FIRST THINGS FIRST ...”***

**A SPECIAL MINISTRY UPDATE:**

*First United Methodist Church, Hershey, Pa.*

*Dear Friend in the Messiah,*

*I pray that you are healthy, encouraged, and able to claim and proclaim God’s goodness and faithfulness in these days of global pandemic and strife across our nation.*

*This “First Things First” communication via electronic as well as mail constitutes an important update to the congregation of First UMC. Please make time to thoroughly review the content. If time restricts doing that right at this moment or in one “sitting,” please set it aside until you can return to read this information.*

*Your faith community needs your invested presence in prayer, in participation for ongoing ministry, and in gatherings for spiritual care and growth. Indeed, the community and the world that Jesus came to save requires our participation and presence as the Church of Christ in this time. And, frankly, I pray that our spirits come to realize just how much we need Christ’s Church and our connection in community for our own spiritual, emotional, and mental health and wholeness.*

**To that end, please receive these important updates in the following pages:**

- *Faith-Growth gatherings and short-term studies.*
- *COVID19 update on Sunday morning worship and reopening.*
- *Where we stand financially, and ways to engage in faithful Stewardship in these difficult days.*
- *Mission-ministry opportunities within our reach.*
- *Reviews on recent ministry activities, and opportunities that lie ahead.*

*Together, by God’s grace, we will emerge from all of this awakened in new ways, re-committed in ongoing ways, and ever assured of God’s love.*

*In Christ and Ever By Grace Alone,*



*Pastor Troy Howell*

**WE PRAY THIS INFORMATIONAL MAILING WILL HELP MAINTAIN AND IMPROVE CONNECTION WITH YOUR CHURCH. IF YOU BELIEVE YOU ARE RECEIVING THIS MAILING BY MISTAKE (THAT YOU PREVIOUSLY TRANSFERRED MEMBERSHIP FROM FIRST UM CHURCH, OR IF YOU HAVE CONNECTED WITH ANOTHER CONGREGATION), PLEASE GRANT US THE COURTESY OF CONTACTING US TO INDICATE THAT YOU WANT TO DISCONTINUE CONNECTION WITH FIRST UM CHURCH. THANK YOU.**

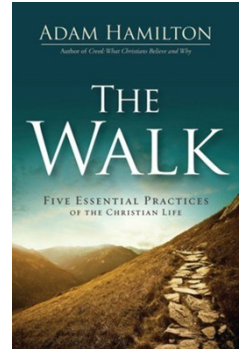
**E-MAIL: [jeanne.cannon@firstumchershey.org](mailto:jeanne.cannon@firstumchershey.org) PHONE: 717-533-9668)**



## "2nd @ First" Growth Gatherings & Short-Term Studies

### "The Walk" by Adam Hamilton

- A 6-week DVD study that examines five essential spiritual practices rooted in Jesus' own walk with God. How do we walk with Christ—daily follow him, grow in him, and faithfully serve him? In the Gospels, Jesus modeled for us the Christian spiritual life. The apostles taught it in their writings. And the Church has, through the last 2,000 years, sought to pursue this Christian spiritual life. Each of these practices is intended as part of our daily walk with Christ while also being an essential part of growing together in the church. In each chapter, Hamilton explores one of these practices, its New Testament foundation, and what it looks like to pursue this practice daily in our personal life and together in the life of the church. Deepen your walk with Christ as we explore the five essential practices of worship, study, serving, giving, and bearing witness to our faith.
- **Facilitators:** Beth Valentine, Kathy Smith, and Julie Webb
- **Meeting place:** Online via Zoom, Sundays at 9:00 am, October 18 to November 22
- **Sign up:** Contact Beth ([elizabeth.valentine@firstumchershey.org](mailto:elizabeth.valentine@firstumchershey.org)) or sign up online at <https://www.signupgenius.com/go/805084bafae23abf58-zoom>



### Wilderness Reflections: Being Faithful in the Midst of a Pandemic

- A 4-week study based on a Sermon Series by Pastor Troy Howell, "DELIVERANCE CAN TAKE AWHILE.....BUT REJOICE GOD IS THE GREAT DELIVERER". Each week we will listen to one of the four sermons in the series based on biblical accounts of what God's people experienced in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. This time of listening will be followed by a time of sharing. We will explore various themes identified in the messages as life lessons for us today: FACING BULLIES IN THE WILDERNESS - DEALING WITH



WILDERNESS ROUNDABOUTS - CUTTING THROUGH RED TAPE IN WILDERNESS TIMES - AVOIDING DETOURS ON OUR WILDERNESS JOURNEY.

A Reflection Guide will be provided. This can be useful both to individuals in their journey of faith and to our congregation as we explore ways to be faithful in our pandemic wilderness. The questions are focused and open-ended designed to make room for the work of the Spirit and participation of/by group members. It is our hope that while on a pandemic wilderness journey we will see beyond the darkness of this world and look for the light birthed by Christ in the midst of a pandemic. You are invited to join us in this spiritual adventure. **Please note class size is limited to a maximum of 12 due to meeting in-person. All First UMC COVID-19 guidelines will be in effect.**

- **Facilitators:** Rev. Jim Dawes and Rev. Phil Jurus
- **Meeting place:** In-Person at First UMC (Room TBD), Tuesdays at 1:00pm., October 20, 27, November 10, 17. No meeting on November 3 due to election day (First UMC polling place)
- **Sign up:** Contact the church office (717-533-9668 or [Jeanne.cannon@firstumchershey.org](mailto:Jeanne.cannon@firstumchershey.org))

## Parent Cue

- A 4-week study looking at relevant topics for parents. How has this pandemic been for you as a parent? Are you anxious? Feeling overwhelmed with uncertainty? Maybe you're just exhausted? Or you're struggling with how to make the most of family time? You're not alone and we want to help - to come alongside you with intentional spiritual care and time for parents to support each other. During each 45-minute session, we'll take a topic (anxiety, uncertainty, exhaustion, and family time), look at a related scripture passage or story, reflect on a few discussion questions, and learn a spiritual practice together. You do not have to commit to all 4 sessions to sign-up.
- **Facilitators:** Stephen Haverstick and Cassie McCachren
- **Meeting place:** Online via Zoom, either Sunday evenings or Tuesday (dependent upon group availability), October 18 to November 8.
- **Sign up:** Contact Cassie ([cassie.mccachren@firststumchershey.org](mailto:cassie.mccachren@firststumchershey.org)) or Stephen ([stephen.haverstick@firststumchershey.org](mailto:stephen.haverstick@firststumchershey.org)); or sign up online at :<https://www.signupgenius.com/go/30E0B44AEAE2AA0FC1-parent>

## TIME TO PARENT



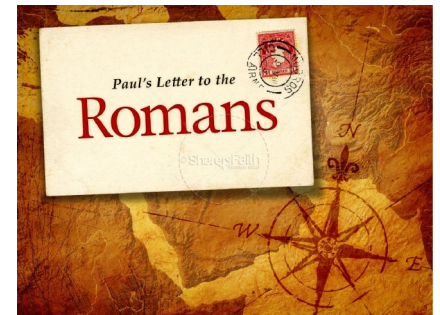
## Fellowship Class

- An ongoing class that reads and discusses books of the Bible - currently the Gospel of Mark.
- **Facilitator:** Craig Fasnacht
- **Meeting place:** Online via Zoom, Sundays at 9:00am. (ongoing class; may join anytime)
- **Sign up:** Contact Craig ([craig@funlandrehoboth.com](mailto:craig@funlandrehoboth.com))



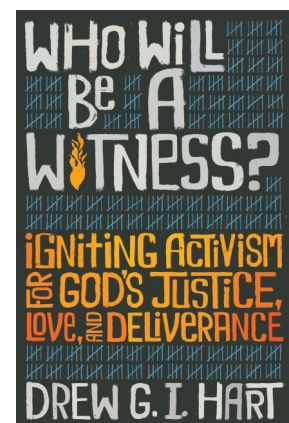
## Bible Study

- A 10-week study of Paul's letter to the Romans
- **Facilitator:** Craig Fasnacht
- **Meeting place:** Online via Zoom, Mondays at 6:30pm or Tuesdays at 9:00am, October 12/13 to December 14/15.
- **Sign up:** Contact Craig ([craig@funlandrehoboth.com](mailto:craig@funlandrehoboth.com))

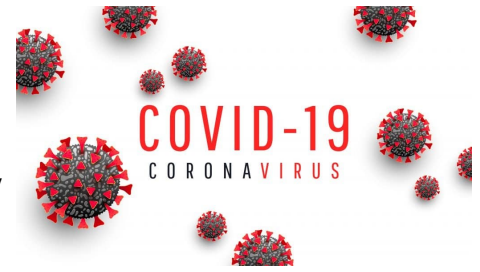


## Racial Justice Book Club

To continue our journey of becoming more anti-racist as followers of Christ and living Micah 6:8 as a church, we will be starting another book club focused on racial justice in November. We will be using Drew Hart's new book *Who Will Be A Witness?* for study and discussion. More details will be announced later via Rapid Pulse, our website, and social media.



## The COVID Pandemic and Worship



Throughout the Pandemic, First UM Church has relied on and benefited from a task force comprised of church leadership, some ministry staff, and the expertise of Dr. Wallace Greene, Diagnostic Virology Director, PSU, Hershey, and a church parishioner.

At a Sept. 21 meeting, Dr. Greene noted evidence of COVID aerosol transmission, reporting approximately 50% of current positive cases traced to indoor restaurants. He warned increased risk as heated indoor air aids virus transmission. Dr. Greene encouraged the group to imagine the Charlie Brown character “Pig Pen” and his dust cloud. That image represents the aerosol cloud of virus exhaled from the nose and mouth by a COVID-positive person. That virus aerosol can travel farther distances, remaining suspended in the air. Accordingly, the 6-foot distancing requirement and wearing of masks is a minimum standard indoors.

This medical report, combined with the age or immune-compromised vulnerability of a significant number of First UM Church’s membership, heightens the gravity of any decision to resume gathered Sunday worship. Such gatherings could be seminal events leading to community infection.

The overwhelming majority of Church leadership has indicated that we should stay the course with online worship and smaller gathering connections until science and medical advice indicates otherwise. In a September meeting of the Staff-Parish Relations Committee, leaders unanimously opposed reopening Sunday worship at this time.

As you may know, limited indoor gatherings have resumed with administrative committees meeting (less than 25, masked, and social distanced), along with a few smaller ministry groups. Efforts are underway to allow for increased small-group usage of indoor areas by AI-Anon, Scouts, youth, etc., per social distancing/face-cover requirements.

Additionally, purchase and installation of equipment to eventually “livestream” Sunday morning worship has been approved. Trustees just awarded the contract, though it will be 6- to 8-weeks before the equipment arrives, with additional time needed for installation and operation. Livestreaming could facilitate resumption of Sunday morning worship – though under present conditions sanctuary attendance would be very restricted (25-30 max.) One reality to keep in mind is that livestreaming will impact the online worship format/participation now experienced.

We realize that this situation grieves many. Our desire to resume some sense of gathered-church normalcy remains. We are blessed by the investment in making the current on-line worship “product” possible. Please hold this situation and leadership in your prayers, offering grace as we seek God’s wisdom to be responsible and faithful to do no harm and to do good. (The COVID19 protocols are online: [hersheyfirstumc.org](http://hersheyfirstumc.org))



## Financial and Stewardship Updates

Your Faithful Response Is Celebrated! And Needed Ongoing ...



The economic impact of the COVID19 pandemic is all around. Obviously the Church has not been exempt. From across this nation we hear how congregations have rallied to fulfill mission, ministry, and meet facility and staff commitments. First UM Church is no exception!

At First UM Church, giving decreased after the shutdown of in-person services. Through July, we were experiencing a deficit of \$32,000 (actual operating expenses exceeding offering/income). Thankfully, we've ended many previous years with cash reserves. We praise God for this blessing, and we **Thank You** as we re-commit to meeting future funding challenges.

After an August update in our online worship service regarding the deficit, parishioners responded sacrificially, reducing the deficit to \$18,000 by month's end. Additionally, thanks to a small bequest in September, and continued increased giving, we anticipate ending September with the year-to-date deficit further reduced to approximately \$13,000. We should rejoice at such encouraging news!

As we enter the final quarter of 2020, please consider – as may be appropriate for your individual/household context – a “catch-up” and/or an extra-mile offering to the General Fund. It would appear that we have a ways to go before we can envision a return to some pre-COVID normalcy. Together, however, we can ensure a strong financial foundation for ministry in and through First United Methodist Church. Thank you for your faithfulness!

### Stewardship: Means of Giving/Making Offering in This Time

Tuesday mornings, 9 am to Noon, you can drop your offering at the Office.

Mail your weekly/monthly offering to First UM Church, 64 West Chocolate Avenue, Hershey, PA 17033

On Line and Auto-Payment Arrangement: Authorize automatic offering transfers from a savings or checking account or via a credit card, to First UM Church. (Contact the Office to request that form)

At [www.firsthersheyumc.org](http://www.firsthersheyumc.org), select “GIVE” from the right-hand menu tab, create a secure profile for a one-time or a recurring offering gift. Note: The online fees are as follows:

Credit card transactions -\$.45 per transaction + 3% (.03) of the donation

Bank transactions - \$.25 per transaction + .3% (.003) of the donation



**Our new  
SCHEDULE OF WORSHIP GATHERINGS  
on page 9.**

## Missions Opportunities Within Reach!

### **Fundraising Campaign for Moyiba UMC in Sierra Leone Within \$3,200.**



- In November 2019, we conducted a special Thanksgiving missions to bless our brothers and sisters in Christ in Sierra Leone. Our partner church, Moyiba “Kissy Brook” UMC in Freetown, Sierra Leone, is in need of a permanent facility. Their original building was condemned and demolished in 2017, and they currently hold worship services and run a school in a temporary structure of tarps and corrugated sheet metal. First UMC committed to a \$30,000 fundraising goal to assist Moyiba UMC with their dream of a new building. The architectural drawing is shown to the right.
- Because of your generosity, \$26,783 was received – almost 90% of our goal! A little over \$3,200 is needed. Though we find ourselves in the midst of a pandemic and the ministry and financial challenges it brings, it remains good and right for us to look to the world for opportunities of connection and blessing beyond our own station. Please consider helping us complete this commitment of \$30,000 to help our partner church in Sierra Leone by closing this \$3,200 gap by Thanksgiving!  
To give: 1) With a check to First UMC with memo “Sierra Leone” or 2) online at <http://www.firstumchhershey.org/give/> (select “Sierra Leone Appeal”). We will keep you updated via the Church’s Facebook, e-mail, and the Church website as the gap is bridged! Thank you!

### **OTHER IMPORTANT MISSIONS NOTES:**

- World Communion Sunday was held Oct. 4. Please note the special information on “World Communion Sunday” offering for graduate students from the United States and those in Ethnic In-Service training programs on page 9. It is not too late to give
- “Signs of Love” ministry opportunity: The Mission ROCS (Reaching Out in Christian Service) team plans a “Signs of Love” to show appreciation to essential workers serving throughout this pandemic. We’re starting with Tender Years daycare to lift in care and prayer those child-care providers on the frontline as they care for children in our area and provide services essential for workers contributing in our communities. You can participate by donating \$10 gift cards to either Wendy’s or Chipotle. These will be part of the support gift provided. You can participate this way or share your interest otherwise by contacting Beth Valentine (elizabeth.valentine@firstumchhershey.org) or mailing or dropping your contribution to the Church office (Open Tues. mornings.) Deadline to receive donations is October 14.
- MISSIONS FUNDS RELEASED YEAR-TO-DATE: We rejoice that because of your ongoing faithfulness given through this time of pandemic, First UM Church has been able to fulfill our mission ministry commitments locally and around the world by releasing the financial supports in 2020 in the chart to the right:

	October 1 2020 YTD
<b>Connectional/Scholarship Support</b>	
Mission Projects & Scholarships	\$ 1,000.00
<b>Missionary Support</b>	
John Calhoun (Ukraine)	\$ 1,875.00
Megan Ginder Melicharova (Czech Republic)	\$ 3,750.00
<b>Local</b>	
Bethesda Mission	\$ 2,250.00
Hands-on Outreach	\$ 793.00
Hershey Food Bank	\$ 2,250.00
Homes of Hope Transitional Housing	\$ 1,500.00
Love, INC	\$ 2,250.00
Family Promise	\$ 1,500.00
UNITE Youth - Hershey	\$ 750.00
She's Somebody's Daughter	\$ 2,250.00
Someone To Tell It To	\$ 2,250.00
United Methodist Home for Children	\$ 2,250.00
<b>National</b>	
Mission Central	\$ 1,500.00
Red Bird Mission	\$ 1,500.00
Red Bird Christian School	\$ 1,500.00
<b>International</b>	
Jamaica (Watsonton Methodist)	\$ 1,500.00
Jamaica (Watsonton Methodist School)	\$ 750.00
Hope International	\$ 1,500.00
Sierra Leone Initiative	\$ 1,500.00
Raising Hope, Inc. - Ukraine	\$ 2,250.00
Uganda Children Support	\$ 1,056.00
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$ 37,724.00</b>
<b>Special Sunday Offerings</b>	
Human Relations Day (January 2020)	\$ 830.00
UMCOR Sunday (March 2020)	\$ 2,085.00

## Ministry Activities ...

### **Worship Assistance:**

If you have gifts to share by reading worship content or participating in musical offerings on video, or for when we regather and want to help stream our sanctuary worship, (by controlling a camera, by selecting video inputs, by mixing sound for the sanctuary and for the video stream, or by switching between apps on a computer), please contact Shawn Gingrich at the church. It'll take a crew of people to make a live broadcast of worship possible someday.



### **Children's Ministry Update-**



Our Children's Ministry kicked off the school year with a family picnic outside at Camp Catherine. We honored our children who are moving into BOND, our preteen ministry, and youth, since we were unable to do this at the end of last school year. We will be having biweekly lessons and activities in our small groups via Zoom this fall with hangout sessions on the "off weeks". Yard chats are continuing and will continue until the weather becomes too cold, with both our children and preteens being able to sign up for a visit from Cassie in their yard.

In October, we have a Fall Family Fun event (being held in conjunction with the youth), where we will gather at Camp Catherine as families to create signs of hope to take back to our neighborhoods. Please continue to pray for our children and families as they are navigating this very different school year.

### **Youth + Young Adult Ministries**

Despite limitations created by COVID and the frustrations with weather, our youth ministry has continued meeting outside in-person at Camp Catherine and Shank Park! I can't say enough about our youth leaders – they are extensions of the Good Shephard's staff consistently and creatively connecting with their small groups on a weekly basis. At our Fall Kick Off for 7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade, 25 students and 8 leaders gathered and we introduced our 2020-2021 theme for the school year – **Just Mercy**. We talked about God's mercy for us as foundational to our identity and being people who "love mercy," particularly in 2020. Your prayers are appreciated as we make the most of the outdoor weather through October. Moving indoors will pose a challenge, but our culture of small group ministry will afford us a viable and fruitful winter even still.



I'm very grateful for Emma Hetrick, Leah Holbrook, Todd Troutman, Sara Troutman, and Alyssa Kretz. This summer, they joined me to lead a book club for our church with over 30 participants. Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy* served as a window into the topic of racial injustice and the pain experienced by our Black brothers and sisters from a Jesus-centered perspective. Following the completion of *Just Mercy*, this leadership team met with me, Pastor Troy, and Pastor Jim Dawes (at Troy's invitation) to reflect and discern God's leading in next steps. We look forward to the next book club (see announcement in the faith-growth gatherings section) and our pursuit of Christ's call to "act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly."

Opportunities for your engagement include:

- "Adopt" A College Student – "An opportunity for families or individuals to connect with college students in our church. Adoption is a 1 year commitment, and we encourage people to write letters, send care packages, make an occasional call, and pray for your student. Sign-up on our website. We still have some students to be adopted!"  
we still have some students to be "adopted"
- Mid-week Zoom Bible study for youth – looking for assistants to co-lead with me come November. Contact me if you have an interest.

Stephen Haverstick



## **Some Additional Reflections from the Pastor:**

When my appointment was announced in April, the pandemic outbreak had just resulted in shutdowns/closings. Like so many, I hoped that a comprehensive and cohesive response would result in a much-improved situation by late spring. I never imagined that this appointment would begin with no gatherings.

Although it's challenging to enter and pastor a congregation in these circumstances, efforts to connect and navigate a way are ongoing.

I initiated in-person meetings with leadership and key administrative committees, including Council, Trustees, the Staff-Parish Relations Committee, ROC Missions, as well as times with others willing to meet, including: several ministry/fellowship groups; those without internet connection and experiencing the press of isolation; youth ministry; and multiple on-line meetings with children/children's ministry, Sunday School, and more. Meetings with ministry staff have been held from prior to my physical arrival, and they continue, as have meetings with affiliated groups/leaders who use the First UM Church facility.

Additionally, some have responded to my offers both in print and via on-line worship services for in-person visitations to become acquainted (outdoors when possible, with mask and social distancing.)

Three in-person September worship gatherings were planned: 15 attended a "Music and Meditation" gathering in the Sanctuary; 20 joined in outdoor worship in Chocolate Town Park; about 70 registered for an outdoor worship at Camp Catherine Sept. 27 that was messed up by two hours of unexpected rain. Please note our Worship Gathering Schedule on the last page. We will offer other gatherings as possible, and want to commit to creative means for gathering in Advent and Christmas. (Though most of the alternative gatherings likely won't please any of us.)

Several times in recent weeks I have sat down with parishioners to hear their heart-cries, views, and concerns regarding social/cultural unrest and racial strife. Additionally, I am working with lay leadership and ministry staff on offerings for connection and faith-growth via groups/studies in the next couple months.

It's also been a priority to discover how things work administratively, financially, and operationally. Though this is complicated by not gathering, I have invested time in asking questions and conversation, in reading and listening.

I covet your prayers, even as I lift you in prayer.

In Christ,  
*Pastor Troy Howell*



## SCHEDULE OF WORSHIP GATHERINGS:

Sun., Oct. 18, 4:30 p.m. – Informal/Outdoor Worship Gathering (Rescheduled from 9/27)

NOTE THE START TIME IS CHANGED TO 4:30 P.M.

**At Camp Catherine** (1275 Swatara Rd, Hershey, PA 17033)

If you registered for 9/27, you're registered for this one. Others are asked to register by contacting us @: [jeanne.cannon@firstumchershey.org](mailto:jeanne.cannon@firstumchershey.org) / PH: 717-533-9668

Face Covering & Social Distancing; Bring a Lawn Chair

Prayer, Community Celebration, and moments of Word & Music

Wed., Oct. 21, 7 p.m. – Music and Meditation Gathering #2 (In the Sanctuary)

Registration Required (E-mail or Phone the Office at:)

[jeanne.cannon@firstumchershey.org](mailto:jeanne.cannon@firstumchershey.org) / PH: 717-533-9668

Maximum of 25 / Face Covering & Social Distancing; no singing

Organ/Piano Music; A Stained Glass image reflection; & Prayers

40 minutes

Wed., Nov. 11, 12 Noon – Music and Mediation Gathering #3 (In the Sanctuary)

Registration Required (E-mail or Phone the Office at:)

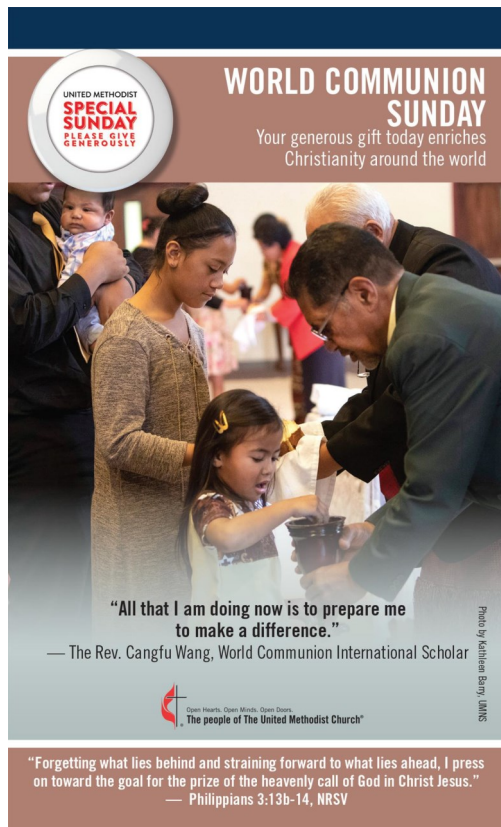
[jeanne.cannon@firstumchershey.org](mailto:jeanne.cannon@firstumchershey.org) / PH: 717-533-9668

Maximum of 25 / Face Covering & Social Distancing; no singing

Organ/Piano Music; A Stained Glass image reflection; & Prayers

40 minutes

**Advent and Christmas Eve:** Things likely will be very different for the upcoming season of Advent and on Christmas Eve. We have begun working on possibilities to facilitate much smaller gatherings and worship opportunities – especially on Christmas Eve – amidst COVID19 safety protocols. We'll provide updates as soon as preliminary decisions are made.



The graphic features a circular logo on the left with the text "UNITED METHODIST SPECIAL SUNDAY PLEASE GIVE GENEROUSLY". The main title "WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY" is in large, bold letters, with the subtitle "Your generous gift today enriches Christianity around the world" below it. The central image shows a group of people, including a woman holding a baby and a young girl, gathered around a table. A quote from Rev. Cangfu Wang is at the bottom left, and the United Methodist Church logo and name are at the bottom center. A vertical photo credit is on the right side.

UNITED METHODIST  
SPECIAL SUNDAY  
PLEASE GIVE  
GENEROUSLY

**WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY**  
Your generous gift today enriches  
Christianity around the world

"All that I am doing now is to prepare me  
to make a difference."  
— The Rev. Cangfu Wang, World Communion International Scholar

Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors.  
The people of The United Methodist Church

Photo by Kathleen Barry, MMS

"Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press  
on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."  
— Philippians 3:13b-14, NRSV

One of six churchwide Special Sundays with offerings of The United Methodist Church, World Communion Sunday calls the church for each out to all people and model diversity among God's children. The special offering supports World Communion Scholarships, Ethnic Scholarships and Ethnic In-Service Training. During this quadrennium (2017-20), The United Methodist Church has received over \$2.2 million to support the hopes and dreams of emerging leaders for lasting impact. When you give generously on World Communion Sunday, you equip talented, qualified students from around the globe to become the world changers God created them to be. Please write your check to your local church with "WCS" written on the memo line.

September 8, 2020

*“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Luke 1:78-89)*

*“But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint”. (Isaiah 4:31)*

Dear Sisters and Brothers of the Susquehanna Conference,

Grace to you in the name of Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace, Healer of our Brokenness, and Hope of the World!

You've made it through a most unusual summer. The pandemic disrupted your plans for Lent, Easter, and vacation Bible school, among others. Yet you stepped up with creativity and resolve. I am so grateful for your openness to change and willingness to find new ways to guide your congregations in worship, spiritual growth, and caring about their neighbors as you provide safety protocols for their wellness.

Seasons change as time goes by, too fast for some and too slow for others. Soon, Fall will be here with us and Winter will not be far away. Now you are starting to plan for Advent and Christmas. These are among the most beloved seasons of the church year. At the same time, due to the inevitable temperature change, you are considering more activities in the church building as outdoor options become less available.

As we face seasonal change in the midst of the pandemic, we are facing the unresolved uncertainty about the containment of COVID-19. With the flu season coming, more concerns about protection and safety are raised.

My hope is that all our churches can continue to demonstrate vitality in ministry and witness and will offer a faith-filled and joyous season of the church, including Advent and Christmas services, while also maintaining safety practices. If you are meeting in person here are a few suggestions to help you plan:

- First, unless the Pennsylvania Department of Health recommends otherwise for all indoor gatherings, continue to limit room occupancy to 25 people, ensure six feet of social-distancing space between each person, require masks, provide hand-washing/sanitizing stations, and disinfect rooms where people gather.
- Consider offering the Christmas service in more than one room in the building. Set up rooms to maintain social distancing. If possible, broadcast to these rooms. Or consider other clergy (deacons, retired clergy, those in extensions ministries, etc.) or lay people with good leadership skills to lead the same service in the other rooms. Think through how people will enter and exit the spaces making sure there is enough room to be properly distanced.
- Add services throughout the week to spread out the attendance. Perhaps offer services in the late afternoon and/or evening on Dec. 24, or more than one on Dec. 25.  
“Drive-in” services may still be possible. You might investigate using a radio frequency to broadcast the sound. You can find more information [here](#).
- All those able to wear a mask must wear one. Offer hand-washing/sanitizing stations and face coverings. Our conference disaster response ministry has provided hand sanitizer and face masks for our churches in every district. Contact your district office to obtain some.
- No hugs and handshakes. This may be one of the most difficult things to prevent. Suggest alternatives, such as bowing or other gestures at a distance.
- Continue online worship, regardless.

As you replenish cleaning supplies, keep in mind that The United Methodist Church has arranged for discounts from Home Depot and Lowe's. Specific information can be found [here](#).

These are just a few suggestions. As we find more, we will share them.

As the Labor Day Weekend ends and the school year just started, the next several weeks will be critical to considering if any change in the safety protocol is warranted. I trust that you are ever more faithfully seeking discernment as you serve God and love God's people in a way that is fitting to your context of ministry. However, I continue to urge you to put safety and wellness of life as the top priority for such a time as this.

As dire needs of your community expand so does your missional response. Thanks be to God for you! Your commitment and love for God's people and those who do not yet know Christ is inspiring.

Things will be different this Fall and Winter. But we can be confident that Christ will always be with us, for “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). Let us be reminded that a light comes to dispel darkness; that a vulnerable child, born in modest circumstances, would become the Savior and Lord of the world. His name is Immanuel, God with us.

In Ministry with You,  
Jeremiah Park