



April 20, 2020

Dear Friends –

Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! And to all of our pastors and church leaders...THANK YOU...YOU DID IT!! Christ conquered death, and you made it through a Holy Week like no other. Christ rose again and appeared first to the women. And you continue to be present to your congregations, but in new ways. And oh how we long for things to be familiar again.

And we write to you now to begin to address the “How Long” question! To frame this theologically, when the Psalmist asked “how long” in Psalm 90, the writer did so after his introductory words of praise, “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.” Labelled a “prayer for deliverance from national adversity” by the editors of the NRSV, Psalm 90 is a prayer that Israel would be delivered from difficulty. And while I certainly hope that 2020 is nothing like the BCE years which found Israel wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, we know that God never left them alone. Thankfully our faith reminds us that God is with us in the midst of this pandemic, but God no more gives us a direct answer to our “how long” question than God did our ancestors in the faith.

We’ve been hearing you ask us the “how long” question. How long until we can go back to the way things were? How long until we can gather again? How long until we can go back to church? To the “how long until we can go back to the way things were” question, I daresay never. And that’s good news. More people are tuning in to your services online than stopped in for real time worship. Congregations are intentionally keeping in touch with members and friends in new ways. Children are hearing the faith stories during virtual story hours. I pray that doesn’t get lost!

But as for answering the questions - when we can gather again in groups of more than 5 or 10, or how long until we can go back to the church without personal protective equipment – well that’s a bit harder. We will continue to follow the direction of New Jersey Governor Murphy, and because of our proximity, the advice of New York Governor Cuomo. But as of now, we ask that your church buildings remain closed through the month of May.

To the “how long” question, we will also listen to the voices of science. In that regard we are blessed to hear from Elder Tia Goss Sawhney (First Presbyterian Church Newark) who earned

her Ph.D. in Public Health.

### **“Church Non-normalcy (for now) is a Moral Imperative**

Imagine the horror of having 45 people ill, 3 hospitalized, and 2 dead three weeks after choir practice. This horror was reality for Mount Vernon Presbyterian Church in Skagit County, Washington. On March 6, when the county had not reported a single case of COVID-19, 60 people met at the church for choir practice (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/01/us/washington-choir-practice-coronavirus-deaths/index.html>). The participants felt fine, sanitized their hands upon admission, used their own sheet music, and maintained social distance.

Church attendance should not have deadly consequences. Yet, while COVID-19 is in our community, every church gathering is a potential site of COVID-19 transmission. Furthermore, since a typical church gathering includes many people who are particularly at risk of complications and death from COVID-19 due to age, health conditions, or obesity, even a brief sharing the peace can have deadly consequences.

We all want to get back to church, raise our voices in praise of God, hug our fellow congregants. We pray for our return to normalcy. That great goal, however, has to be balanced against the moral imperative of protecting the vulnerable members of our community. Therefore, while COVID-19 is anywhere in or near our community, we need to care for our community by not congregating.”

During this time of uncertainty, our prayers continue to be with you and yours for health and safety.

God Bless –

Rev. Dr. Barbara A. Smith  
Transitional Director of Presbytery Ministries

Elder Warren C. McNeill  
Stated Clerk