

A Message from Rev. Pam Holt: Return to Worship or Still Safer at Home?



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Rev. Pam Holt, Regional Minister

We been practicing “safer at home” for about six weeks now. Like you, I lament that life has changed. We cannot be with our family or our friends to celebrate birthdays and anniversaries in ways we are accustomed. We have cancelled weddings, graduations, and vacations. We’ve cancelled many Regional and church events. We cannot even gather in person in our sanctuaries for worship or funerals. These days of safer at home are very hard, but I want to thank you for your part in loving your neighbor and yourself in staying home to stay safe and well.

I have been amazed at the wonderful worship services that are happening all around our denomination and our Region on-line, through live streaming. I am grateful for technology that allows us to be in worship together and share time around the Lord’s table through our devices.

In the past few days, we have learned that in Oklahoma, worship spaces can be opened for in-person gatherings beginning May 3rd. Please, please, don’t rush into returning to your sanctuary!

Following the guidelines and wisdom of the Centers for Disease Control and the Oklahoma Health Department, we know that the risks for in-person gatherings are still VERY HIGH.

The Region is strongly encouraging all of our congregations to continue to worship on-line until safe and responsible protocols can be put in place for each of our worshipping communities.

In preparation for some day returning to in-person worship, the Region hosted conversation with clergy this past week and has provided worksheets and initial questions for clergy and leadership teams to start making a plan, in writing, about safe practices to return to gathered worship. These resources are provided on our website at OKdisciples.org under the COVID-19 Resources “Thinking About Returning to Worship?”

Please take your time to have discussions and put protocols in place and communicate expectations to the members BEFORE returning to in-person worships.

We are here to help. Remember, go slow. Take time to think and plan, together. For your neighbor. For your self. For your pastor.

Stay well. Stay safe. Stay connected. Stay hopeful.

May God’s blessing of peace and protection and God’s grace and mercy continue to be upon us all.

Rev. Pam Holt, Regional Minister

General Minister and President on re-opening congregations

Posted on April 30, 2020 at 3:36 pm.



Rev. Teresa "Terri" Hord Owens
General Minister and President

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. — John 13:34-35 (NRSV)

Dear Church:

We are in Eastertide, when we rejoice in the good news of the resurrection, and yet so much our journey still feels like the wilderness. I continue to pray for you as we walk through these days of distancing together.

This week, some state governments are beginning to lift stay-at-home orders and allow some businesses and industries to reopen their doors. These reopening conversations are understandably raising questions about how and when churches should resume in-person worship services. These are difficult decisions, but I want to encourage you, as difficult as it is, not to rush too quickly back. It is not yet time to gather for worship in person.

I know that it is heartbreaking not to be able to gather. We want nothing more than to hug our loved ones and squeeze the hands of our grieving friends. We want nothing more than to worship together and join our voices together in song. We want nothing more than to break bread together at our beloved communion tables.

But the phased reopening plans developed by public health experts call for several benchmarks to indicate safety such as 14 days of declining case counts, widespread testing, and contact tracing. We are not there yet.

The economic impact of this pandemic is devastating, to be sure, and many of the decisions to reopen business are in response. There is and will be much work to do as we care for our hurting neighbors.

Church, we don't make decisions based on economics. We make decisions based on love. And here in this time, in the midst of this pandemic, the loving thing to do is not to gather for worship. Love, as we know from 1 Corinthians 13:4-5, is patient. Love does not insist on its own way.

It is not easy to love from a distance. It is not easy to overcome our own desire for being physically close to our church family. It is not easy to give up the familiar in favor of this new way of being.

It is likely we will never meet in quite the same way again. But we have a historic opportunity here. We have the chance to test new ways, learn creatively, imagine beyond old boundaries and grow in our understanding of the family of God.

Let me be clear: even as we have gathered in different ways, we are still the church. Even as we have worshiped on Facebook and YouTube from our living room couches, even as we have prayed over Zoom, we are the church, and God is at work in and through us. We will continue to be the church.

There are a number of resources available for helping congregations think through how and when to resume in-person worship services, and we have linked to several of them on our COVID-19 resource page. I found [this guidance from the Wisconsin Council of Churches](#) and [this pastoral letter from Disciples pastor Brandon Gilvin](#) particularly helpful.

In addition, [this letter from the College of Regional Ministers](#) offers wisdom and hope. Many regional ministers are also offering guidance based on realities in your local context. I urge you to listen to them and to be in conversation with one another as you make prayerful decisions with your church leadership.

I have been inspired by the creativity, innovation, and compassion from Disciples over the past two months. You are already imagining new ways of being church, and I have confidence that we will face the future together with courage and grace, strengthened always by the love of God.

Grateful to be serving with you,
Rev. Terri Hord Owens
General Minister and President