

A special message from Bishop Sandra to the WVUMC

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By Sandra Steiner Ball

Dear West Virginia Conference Members and Friends,

I continue to be thankful for your faithfulness and dedication to your ministry and mission with all God's people! I am thankful for your commitment to the essential services you provide to your communities and beyond by creatively providing worship, bible studies, prayer groups, and community services to care for those who need food, shelter, clothing, medical care, help with bills and transportation. Thank you for adapting to these times of COVID-19 by offering virtual, on-line, drive in, and telephone opportunities for worship, study, prayer, and visitation. Thank you for finding ways to continue your community services by changing processes so that we do no harm by maintaining at least 6 feet of physical distancing, using masks, sanitizing, washing hands, making deliveries in some cases, and encouraging the most vulnerable among us to stay at home.

I praise God that Christ's Churches in the West Virginia Conference have never been closed. The church is the people and the Church of Jesus Christ is alive and well in West Virginia and has adapted to offering our essential services in new ways that extend our reach for Jesus Christ, that do good, that do no harm, and have helped all of us to stay in love with God. God's Pentecost Spirit continues to move through us, giving birth to new ways of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Thank you for the many re-launch teams that are working with and through the re-launch guidelines to help each congregation prepare for and determine when and how each one will resume in person worship and continue to do no harm seeking to follow the biblical mandate of Christ – to love one another.

Not every church will resume their in-person gatherings at the same time, nor should they. Each community is different. Each congregation has a differing number of people in vulnerable categories, each church building is different and can hold differing numbers of people and maintain the physical distancing space of at least 6 feet, each church will need to develop its own plan for sanitizing and cleaning after the use of rooms and spaces in each building. And, we cannot leave those persons behind who need for us to continue our

on-line, drive-in, or phone presence even as we begin to think about re-launching the use of our church buildings.

Our guidelines help congregations think through these matters and many more. The guidelines and several relaunch resources are on the Conference website wvumc.org. Your Superintendents, your Bishop, and your Conference Staff stand ready to help you work through your questions as you engage these guidelines.

There has been much conversation about re-launching and “religious leaders have been directed to take the lead in protecting their people because we love our people and want to keep them safe.” It is out of love that our re-launch guidelines have been developed. It is out of love that we have given guidance for safety precautions, sanitation, and encouraging sensitivity to vulnerable age groups and those with pre-existing medical conditions so that they and we do not potentially put these persons in harm’s way.

It is loving to pay attention to public health guidelines, local officials, and our church guidelines as you consider how and when to re-launch the use of your church buildings for study, prayer, worship, and community service. It is vitally important to remember that re-launching in-person church gatherings does not and cannot mean resuming all our activities as we were doing them before this pandemic as if there is no virus. We must thoughtfully, prayerfully, and carefully attend to public health, the common good, and the well-being of others as part of our witness and mission of Jesus Christ.

Grace and Peace,
Sandra Steiner Ball
Area Bishop, West Virginia Conference
