

## A Letter to the West Virginia Conference

### Bishop Sandra urges congregations to continue using masks and social distancing



March 7, 2021

Dear West Virginia Conference Pastors and Congregations,

I give thanks to God for each pastor and each congregation daily! It has now been a full year since the COVID-19 pandemic began. When it started, most of us thought that the pandemic would be short lived, lasting a few months. Last year, we were looking at Lent 2020 and expecting to be back to using our Church buildings, our worship spaces, by Easter and certainly by Pentecost with no problem. However, the pandemic continued to challenge our “normal” way of doing things.

Now, we are in the Lenten season of 2021 and are looking forward to Easter and to Pentecost once again. Things have changed. People are now getting the vaccine. The number of infections and hospitalizations are down. For all this, I give God thanks and praise! However, now is not the time to let up on the practices that have helped to mitigate this deadly virus. As several congregations begin to again utilize their buildings for worship and other activities, please remember to work with your relaunch teams, continue to use the guidelines as posted on the conference website, and please continue to check with your local health officials in regard to local outbreaks and safe practices.

Our world, national, state and local health experts remind us constantly that wearing masks save lives! In West Virginia, there is still a mask mandate. Remaining socially distanced from one another cuts down on the spread of the virus from one person to another and we should be limiting the amount of time that groups spend together enclosed in rooms or worship areas. We need to continue to space people who do not live in the same household six feet apart in our indoor and our outdoor gathering places.

We must continue to sanitize and refrain from passing items hand to hand from one person to another. Congregational and choral singing is still not recommended by our state health officials. Please see the recent webinar posted on the West Virginia Council of Churches Facebook page to hear what they say about singing.

As we look toward Easter, there is hope, there is new life on the horizon when it comes to the COVID pandemic and so much more. Let us plan our Easter celebrations in ways that continue to keep people safe and reduce the risk of spreading the virus, especially as we realize the new variants are both more contagious and some are more deadly. Wear masks! Realize the safest gatherings and the gatherings most open to visitors will be celebrations held in outdoor spaces. Keep people distanced and place an emphasis on instrumental rather than sung music. Additionally, please remember that our new normal involves continuing our online presence. If you discontinue your online presence, you will cut people off from the ministry and proclamation of the Gospel. Jesus came not to cut people off from God, but to be a bridge so that all could come to know the love, mercy, and forgiveness of God. As followers of Christ, we must do the same.

In this Lenten season where we examine our faith and move together toward Easter, may we plan our Easter celebrations in ways that are truly safe and life-giving, not just for some but for all God's people. I look forward to the Spirit-filled, creative ways that we will continue our Lenten disciplines, walk with Jesus through Holy Week, and rise with Christ seeking to live as Easter people.

Peace,

Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball