



April 23, 2020

Grace and Peace,

Since the weekend of March 15, 2020, the churches throughout our presbytery have done a remarkable job making the shift from in-person worship to online worship. Our staff and other leadership of the presbytery have been astounded by your ability to do what would have been impossible years ago. On behalf of the presbytery, we want to thank you for being open, creative, faithful, and steadfast as leaders in a pandemic crisis.

I am writing to you today to offer our response to the news to the reopening of Georgia businesses. I have spoken to church leaders, ecumenical partners, hospital chaplains, and our PCUSA denominational leadership. No matter what happens in the business sector and community-at-large, it is imperative for congregations and houses of worship to **continue to refrain from large gatherings until a congregation can find a way to do so in a way that keeps people safe and can keep up the proper health standards in the midst of the COVID-19**. This means that churches cannot not rush to go back to church business as usual. This means that churches will need to have a slow and staggered approach for planning in-person worship that will require patience, wisdom, public health expertise, and a model for sustainability. Please take a moment to read this article that offers a check point list for the 24 things for churches to consider before reopening ([24 Things](#)).

Let me give you an example of what this means for the presbytery office and for our PCUSA denominational headquarters in Louisville, KY. **The office of the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta will continue to be closed to the public through July 31, 2020**. Our staff will have no more than 2 employees in the building at any time. We plan to utilize masks and take extra measures to keep heavily used surfaces cleaned and sanitized throughout the day. All meetings of the presbytery will be held virtually via Zoom. **Our Stated Meeting of Presbytery will be held via ZOOM on May 9, 2020**. This is a first for us. **The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA will be held virtually to conduct essential business in June of 2020**. This is a first for the entire denomination, but it is necessary in order to keep people safe.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth to encourage them in their midst of differences on whether or not it was a good idea to participate in a practice that was offensive to some and not a big deal to others. He offers a prophetic word that holds true for us as we strive to be a prophetic witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul reminds us that “All things are lawful, but not all things are beneficial. ‘All things are lawful’, but not all things build up” (1 Corinthians 10:23). Friends, it may be lawful to begin to open the doors of the church, but it is not beneficial for churches to open at this time when we think of those who could be put in harm’s way due to the coronavirus.



Presbytery of Greater Atlanta Staff, Committee on Ministry, and Council recommendations for a response to COVID-19:

The following recommendations are based on a theological understanding of what it means to love neighbor and to be a good neighbor in the midst of the pandemic of coronavirus/ COVID-19.

Worship/Meetings:

- We **STILL STRONGLY** recommend
 - that groups over 10 do not gather in person until **FURTHER** notice (*including worship services, weddings, funerals, and other ministry/ programmatic gatherings*).
 - that those who meet in person practice **social distancing at all times**.
 - that staff and clergy minimize time onsite, while remembering the importance of checking in on the safety of the building on a steady basis.
 - that churches/organizations keep the buildings clean as a means of flattening the curve and keeping people safe.
- We **CONTINUE TO**
 - **encourage** churches to explore new and creative ways to pre-record or live-stream elements of worship that are made accessible to members.
 - **invite** churches to explore the utilization of online giving for their members during this time of social distancing.
 - **hope** that churches will work together creatively and collaboratively, sharing online resources, and carrying the load together for ministering to congregants, clergy and the community at large.

Pastoral Care/Visitation

- We **STILL STRONGLY RECOMMEND** that clergy and visitation teams utilize telephone and other electronic means of “visiting/connecting with” members.
- We recommend that churches receive consent (preferably written) when doing face-to-face visits with sick members. Please be sure to be in dialogue with the family members who would be impacted by your face-to-face visit.

Mission/Vision

- We **STILL STRONGLY RECOMMEND** that congregations live into the Matthew 25 emphasis of caring for the least of these by practicing and participating in “distance” ministry.
- We **STONGLY RECOMMEND** that churches remain connected and offer compassion to the most vulnerable communities who are impacted by this pandemic. Vulnerable communities include but are not limited to racial/ethnic people groups, those within refugee/immigrant communities, individuals with pre-existing conditions, those without access to adequate healthcare, and the poor among us who are represented by every race, creed, and color.

Friends, I leave you with this. Last week, I had trouble sleeping. One of the fleeting thoughts that I had in the middle of the night was to research sermons and quotes from clergy who had gone through this before us with the Influenza Pandemic of 1918. I stumbled upon an article from the Alabama Journal, which lifted up clergy and rabbis who were prophetic voices choosing the safety of their members and neighbors over rash decisions to get back to life as they had once known it. Click here to read the article for yourself ([1918 Alabama Clergy Response](#)).

While it is great to look to the wisdom of the past, I asked one of our own chaplains, Rev. Hamilton Barnes, to offer a statement from his perspective as a Chaplain at Piedmont. He is side-by-side with health workers who are putting their lives on the line to fight against this virus, caring for the sick, and walking alongside those who are facing death. He has this to say:

Frontline medical staff are prepared and doing our best as we continue to put ourselves at risk to take care of our patients, many of whom are on a very long slow road to recovery – likely over months. The Covid-19 virus is still a concern and still infecting all age groups, especially young mothers, middle aged, and the elderly. Also, know that doing the hard work of moving services online and out of sanctuaries did help slow the spread of the virus. Please continue keeping up this good work by keeping our most vulnerable out of harm’s way – while praying for grace, hope, comfort, and peace.

Church, keep doing what you have been doing by praying, offering virtual services, being generous to those in need, and flattening the curve by staying at home. Thank you in advance for being faithful and prophetic in this season.

With much love and deep peace,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Aisha Brooks-Lytle".

Rev. Aisha Brooks-Lytle, Executive Presbyter
Presbytery of Greater Atlanta