



GREAT PLAINS ANNUAL CONFERENCE of The United Methodist Church

REV. DR. RUBEN SAENZ JR., *Resident Bishop*

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Dear Clergy of the Great Plains Conference,

March 16, 2020

Grace and peace to you in the name of the Savior, Jesus Christ, who dispels our fears with the peace he gives. (John 14:27)

As I shared in an email last week, concern continues to grow regarding the rapid spread of coronavirus, or COVID-19. As spiritual leaders in your communities, I don't need to tell you about the impacts this virus has had on the physical and mental well-being of people in our cities and towns, including our own churches.

I am writing today in response to some guidelines released Sunday night by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. If you have not yet seen, the CDC tightened its suggested guidelines, urging a nationwide stop to gatherings of more than 50 people for at least the next eight weeks. The Trump administration then on Monday encouraged even smaller groups of no more than 10 people gathering for at least the next two weeks. While saying this is difficult — particularly during this Lenten season of reflection and the joy that comes with Easter Sunday — I encourage you to prayerfully consider following these new guidelines, particularly the gatherings of 50 people. Doing so could would enjoin us with a formidable nationwide effort to stop the spread of the virus as we take protective measures to “FlattenTheCurve.” The Flatten The Curve initiative seeks to slow down and even prevent an explosive outbreak of the virus, therefore allowing the nation's health care infrastructure to keep up with the volume of people who seek treatment.

I realize how difficult this can be. Indeed, many of our smaller churches fall well under this 50-person guideline. But many others do not. I want to offer some strategies:

- Should you choose to meet, consider adding worship services at varied times to reduce the number of people present at one time.
- Record or livestream your entire service or at least the sermon and post it to Facebook or YouTube or your church website. I am proud of so many of our pastors across the Great Plains who showed their creativity — everything from full services broadcast as though the worship experience was a normal Sunday to fireside chats to simple devotions broadcasted from the kitchen table to a bedtime story for children on Sunday night. I invite you to join Todd Seifert, our communications director, on Facebook Live at 7 p.m. Monday, March 16, and/or 10 a.m. Tuesday, March 17. He'll share information about low-cost equipment you can use as well as legal considerations for streaming your services. The conference's Facebook page is www.facebook.com/GreatPlainsUMC/.
- Share your written sermon via a blog or post to social media.
- Use Facebook live to connect with your congregation or with small groups for Bible study.
- Consider purchasing a Zoom account and use the video-conferencing software to broadcast your services or to interact with your congregation throughout the week for a devotion or Bible study.

The conference's communications team will be doing its best to gather short stories from churches across the conference in coming days and weeks to share ideas of how some of our churches are connecting with their congregations and communities. Be sure to share things you are trying with David Burke on our communications team at dburke@greatplainsumc.org.

Please watch your email each day for periodic updates from the Rev. Hollie Tapley, our disaster response coordinator. She will not send an email every day but rather will share pertinent information as it becomes

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available. And please check the conference's website at www.greatplainsumc.org/coronavirus on a regular basis. You'll find links to the latest information from state health departments and tips for prevention and recovery.

I think it appropriate that one of the four lectionary readings for this 4th Sunday of Lent includes the 23rd Psalm. In it, David the psalmist declares "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." David looks back over his life and remembers that the Lord's presence, care, and help was with him ever since he was a boy tending sheep in the pasture, during his rise to be anointed as king of Israel, and throughout his monarchy as shepherd king of Israel, the Lord's flock. The Lord had seen David through life's ups and downs. The same Lord who led and met David's needs is our Lord and shepherd. We can trust that the Lord keeps watch over us and is with us when we walk through shadowy valleys in whatever forms they present themselves.

The rod and the staff were used by shepherds in biblical times to protect their flocks from danger, and today we use doctors, nurses, and even what we've come to know as "social distancing" to protect ourselves and each other from the threat of a infectious viral disease such as COVID-19.

Many people are panic-stricken by the threat of COVID-19 and the negative financial impact they will experience because of reduced employment hours, layoffs, and the disappearance of work. But as people of faith, we take strength from God's voice that calms us and calls us to "fear not" in one way or another 365 times in scripture — one for each day of the year! We are called to be the church in times such as this. So, continue to seek ways to serve and be the church for the most vulnerable in your congregations and communities, even more so in this convulsive time.

Let us join David in proclaiming, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

Allow these words and the knowledge that you, indeed, are loved and cared for by Jesus Christ, the Great Shepherd as you in turn shepherd, love, care for, and serve those in your mission field, especially the most vulnerable, the voiceless, and invisible.

Stay safe. Show God's love to others. Be blessed by God to be a blessing.

Peace,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Ruben Saenz Jr.", written in a cursive style.

Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr.