



GREAT PLAINS ANNUAL CONFERENCE
of The United Methodist Church

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Dear Clergy and Laity of the Great Plains Conference,

Grace, mercy, and peace, from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Out of an abundance of caution I am strongly encouraging that in-person worship services for congregations located in counties identified as being in critical or dangerous statuses related to the COVID-19 pandemic be suspended until further notice. I fully recognize that this means worshipping physically apart from one another during the Thanksgiving and Advent seasons, including Christmas Eve, funerals, weddings, and other large group gatherings but I believe this is the most responsible action at this time to preserve the health and wellbeing of our laity and clergy.

Churches not in counties with critical or dangerous COVID-19 infection and hospitalization statuses may continue to meet, but please read further in this message for guidelines required to do so. You can find out your county's status by going to the following websites:

- [COVID-19 Cases in Kansas](#)
- [Coronavirus COVID-19 Nebraska Cases by the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services \(DHHS\)](#)

If you have any questions, please reach out to Rev. Hollie Tapley, conference disaster response coordinator, at htapley@greatplainsumc.org.

Worship in any season of the year is essential to our faith and our overall wellbeing. It helps form and ground us in God's grand story. It provides us with the grace of a deeper understanding of God's love for us and the world, with the desire to live in the way of Christ, and with a right spirit that rejoices always, prays without ceasing, and gives thanks to God in all circumstances.

All of us have beautiful memories of Thanksgiving and Christmas worship services. We look forward to expressing our gratitude for God's goodness and providence during Thanksgiving. We hunger spiritually to affirm the Christmas gifts of hope, joy, faith, and love. We yearn to hear the Christmas hymns of faith, see our children and grandchildren participate in our worship services, and to hear choirs and musicians take us to the heavenly realms of praise and worship to God with their offerings.



We have, over the years, come to narrowly conceive worship as a gathering of a faith community in a church building. We do find in Scripture that the worship of God occurred in a tabernacle, the Temple, and synagogues. However, we also find numerous references to the worship of God that occurred in the wilderness, on mountain tops, in city streets, by rivers and, yes, in people's homes. Sometimes worship happened with a gathered community, and at other times, worship happened in solitude.

I earnestly appeal to you to observe worship with your family during this Thanksgiving and Advent season in the safety of your home or at your church so long as you are not located in a county with the elevated health-risk status and that protocols listed below are followed at the church building that help ensure everyone's safety.

Both Kansas and Nebraska are now in the critical and danger statuses for COVID-19 infection, hospitalization increases, and deaths. News outlets in both states report that hospitals are almost at capacity. Some schools are closing, and students are returning to virtual learning. Universities and colleges are cancelling athletic competitions, closing campuses and sending students home to finish out this semester of learning. Difficulties with accurate contact tracing worsen the spread of the virus. Gov. Pete Ricketts of Nebraska ordered a statewide Health Directive Measure for mask wearing in businesses where people are in close contact for more than 15 minutes and a 25% building occupancy limit, with more restrictions forthcoming. Many counties in Kansas have mandated masks and physical distancing. More and more states are tightening COVID-19 restrictions on a daily basis.

If positive COVID-19 cases in your county are in the moderate or low-risk ranges during this time, in-person services may be held with the following requirements:

- Masks are to be worn by everyone, except children 2 years and younger.
- Strict physical distancing of 6 feet between family units should be observed.
- Gathering spaces are not to exceed 25% occupancy.
- Enough services should be offered to ensure a maximum of 25% occupancy, 6 feet of physical distancing between family units, and the gathering space will be sanitized between services to ensure public safety.

We are living in difficult and uncertain times. I am aware that many of our Thanksgiving tables will be fraught with uncertainties and absent of our loved ones for a variety of reasons. I am aware that this Christmas season will be difficult for individuals, families, and our communities. But we are a people of relentless hope in God in times of darkness, danger, and despair.

Just because we can't gather for worship in our church buildings in this season of pandemic like we are accustomed, it does not in any way mean we cannot worship. In fact, our inability to gather as a community of faith to worship should compel us to find new ways to worship until we are able to gather again.

Please support your local church's online worship services. Use the [Advent in a Box](#) resources on our Great Plains website to help center and guide your devotional life. Follow an [Advent Study](#) with your family or with an online Bible study group. Avail yourselves with daily Advent Scripture readings using the [2020 Advent Lectionary Readings](#). Listen to and sing the hymns of Christmas. Continue giving generously to your local church and to mercy ministries that help people make it through this difficult season. Take spiritual responsibility for your friends, co-workers, clients, patients, and customers, pray for them and live your life in such a way that shows Christ's outreaching love and care for them. Peaceably put an end to quarrels. Courageously name harm, relieve pain and suffering, and heal injury as you are able. This is the true worship God desires and chooses for us.

And please note that the conference is providing worship resources — including an entire service — on video that can be used either on Christmas Eve or Dec. 27. These videos will be posted to the conference website no later than Dec. 18.

Know that you are always in my thoughts and prayers.

Thank you for your loyalty to Christ, to The United Methodist Church you belong to and, as a disciple of Christ, your loyalty to and love of your neighbor.

Agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you (2 Corinthians 13:11).

Ruben Saenz Jr.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Ruben Saenz Jr.", with a stylized, cursive script.