



Mountain Sky Area of The United Methodist Church Mountain Sky Conference

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Dear Laity and Clergy of the Mountain Sky Conference,

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2020 has proven to be a difficult year for so many reasons, the main one being COVID-19 and all the risks and harm it has brought. But there is hope! As I write this, news outlets have reported that Pfizer has been testing a vaccine that is proving to be 90% effective. This could become available as the new year dawns.

But we still must get from here to there. Currently, we are facing the harshest days yet of COVID-19. Rates of transmission are higher than ever, with many of the hospitals across the MSC nearing capacity. Epidemiologists warn us that the worst of COVID-19 has yet to hit.

As a result, I am strongly urging that as of November 22 all our churches cease indoor gatherings for worship and fellowship and continue to provide worship online or via other mediums and continue to creatively connect and deepen the bonds of fellowship, at least through the end of January 2021.

We have learned so much this year and have a great deal of wisdom, insight, and experience to bring to this moment: We have learned how to worship online or over the phone; we have done Bible Studies in parking lots; we have had church drive in/take out dinners. We have done so not just out of an “abundance of caution”. We have done so because we are followers of Jesus Christ, who hold that love of God and neighbor combine all the laws of faith and help us become a more faithful follower of Jesus.

It is this love of God and neighbor that caused us to close our buildings and worship in new ways, so we would not expose one another—particularly the most vulnerable—to COVID-19.

It is this love of God and neighbor that continues to inform how we are to do church in this new era.

It is this love of God and neighbor that has helped us create new ministries to care for those most impacted by COVID-19.

The next couple of months are going to be particularly dangerous and difficult as COVID-19 cases surge across the Mountain Sky Conference. We must do all we can to prevent transmission pathways while at the same time finding new ways to deepen our connections with one another. We are not shutting down worship; we are shutting down COVID-19 transmissions.

I am particularly grateful for the Ministry in a Time of COVID-19 Task Force, which has been meeting weekly, gathering the latest information on the disease as well as best practices for churches. They are releasing new guidelines to assist you as we enter into the holiday season. Please read these updates and feel free to reach out to the team with your questions at covid19taskforce@mtnskyumc.org.

I know that there is a deep longing to be together in worship, particularly as we enter Advent and as Christmas approaches. But while being together and singing Christmas carols might bring short term comfort, it has the potential to do long term harm as we become COVID-19 hotspots.

At this time I want you to consider what it means to follow the General Rules of Methodism: what does it look like for us to Do No Harm, Do Good, and Stay in Love With God? How do our actions reveal a love of God and neighbor?

At Christmas, we remember the story of God's entry into a broken world that was full of yearning. The waiting was excruciating. May we live anew the Christmas story. May we journey through the wilderness of Advent together, awaiting the birth of God's own Son. May we wait with hope and expectation.

Just as we retell the story of God's inbreaking into the world at Christmas, we will have a story to tell about how the Body of Christ responded to a global pandemic to make God's love visible to a frightened world. Together, we are writing a story of hope as the best of humanity emerges to care for one another. Thank you for being a part of that story.

Be well! Stay safe! Wear a mask!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Karen P. Oliveto". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bishop Karen Oliveto