# umlogo_200Saint John’s-Newberry

# United Methodist Church

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Date: December 2, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

*And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior…*--Luke 1: 46-47

As most of you have discovered over the past nine months with the pandemic, it seems like things change, not just daily but moment by moment. Since my letter earlier this week, some of you, like myself, have seen the letter sent by our Bishop, Jeremiah Park, that states the following pertaining to in-person worship and the coronavirus:

**This is a very grave situation that requires a sacrificial response. For your safety and that of your friends, family, and neighbors, I, as bishop, along with the full Cabinet urge you to not conduct indoor**

**in-person worship or gatherings for the rest of the year.**

Please know that I, as your pastor, take very seriously your spiritual health and acknowledge the importance of corporate worship, but I also greatly value your physical well-being. Because of this, I have considered the following in making the decision to suspend our in-house worship:

1. I have been in touch with most of the United Methodist pastors in the Williamsport Area, especially those who worship approximately the same number of persons in-house at their churches each weekend. Our brothers and sisters are also making the difficult decision to suspend in-person worship.
2. To clarify the intent of the letter from the Bishop, I spoke with our District Superintendent to affirm the necessity for us to go virtual for the time being in order to keep our attendees and pastors healthy.
3. I considered the most recent information from within our congregation about a number of persons who have been exposed, some who have been hospitalized and others who are having to quarantine. Before now, it was just something “out there” for most of us. Now, it has affected many of us directly.
4. Upon discussion with medical staff, I have learned that UPMC is growing exceedingly fuller of covid-19 patients which is putting a strain on their ability to care for others, both emergency, urgent and pre-scheduled patients.
5. I have consulted with our Church Council, who, much like the rest of you, have varying views but are still fully supportive of our decision to suspend in-house worship at this time in order to do our part of stopping the spread of this virus.

I have included the Scripture from Luke at the head of this letter to remind us of Mary, the mother of Jesus, who lifted her praises to God despite the uncertainty of what would lie ahead for her—a young, unwed, expectant teenager who had been charged with the task of bearing the Son of God Himself. We have much to learn from Mary in this situation as we move forward into uncertain times ourselves, setting aside our hopes for something more “normal” as we were anticipating Christmas. As the shepherds experienced on that night so long ago:

*And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.**An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.**But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.”*

The good news is still just that…good news. So let us not be afraid. Let us lift our praises yet to God who has sent His own Son to us as a babe in a manger.

We, praise God, are blessed with having technology in place that allows many of you to be ‘in worship’ with us, even when you are not here in the sanctuary. To use our resources wisely, we will be doing “live” worship each weekend on Sunday at 8:15 a.m. Those who normally worship at 5:30 p.m. on Saturday or at the 10:45 service can tune in whenever it is convenient for you as it is recorded on our Facebook page. Anyone can access our services through our website or our Facebook page. You DO NOT have to have a Facebook account to tune in! We will still offer communion service this weekend, so we encourage you to join us online with your cup and your cracker/bread handy so that you might partake.

As for Christmas Eve, we will offer a 3 p.m. family-oriented service online only and a more traditional service at 7 p.m. online only. At 9 p.m., for those who desire to come in-person and don’t mind weathering the dark and cold, we will offer a short service outside at the church where we will read Scripture, sing carols and light our candles together.

Again, I say, this is not an easy decision for us to make anytime, but especially during the important season of Advent. I encourage you to continue to worship, though, throughout this season. Join us for online services. Read God’s Word. Have conversation with God. Sing the carols in your car and in your home. May we, like Mary, offer our praises to our Heavenly Father, even in times of uncertainty. May we, like the shepherds, not be afraid but “spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child” so that others, too, might learn of the great miracle that happened there in Bethlehem over 2,000 years ago.

In Praise of Our Lord,

Pastor Lenore