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Wednesday, April 29, 2020

Dear Friends and Colleagues in Ministry,

I'm writing this letter out of great care and concern for you and your ministries, as well as out of great gratitude and appreciation for how each and every one of you have continued to find ways to be Church during this unprecedented time.

While restrictions on social gatherings continue to be in place (and will continue in some form for the next few weeks, if not longer), I am aware that many of you are beginning to explore and have conversations about what a "return" to in-person worship and ministries might look like. I want to affirm that exploration and those conversations as much as possible, even as I remind you that in-person worship and gatherings are strongly discouraged for the time being.

Because our Annual Conference has congregations in four states (New Mexico, Texas, Arizona, and Utah), any one-size-fits-all guideline on when in-person worship and ministry could or should take place is practically impossible. Further, as I've affirmed before, you all have been providing (and I assume you will continue to provide) *excellent* leadership in your churches and communities. I trust you to discern and lead well, as you have already done these past few weeks.

My pastoral heart, however, wants to offer some encouraging words as you have these conversations about gathering once again as the full community of God for worship, service, and ministry. While these aren't requirements, it is my hope that you will take seriously these five considerations.

First, in conversations with your local leadership on any "return" or "re-opening," I urge you to **pay serious and close attention to all federal, state, and local guidelines**. Different jurisdictions are going to develop their own guidelines on phasing in any return. The federal Center for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines should be your starting point, but also be sure to consult your state and local official communications and orders as well.

Second, as you and your leadership engage in these conversations, you should **consult and be sensitive to your local context (and your people)**. Current CDC guidelines recommend different behaviors and restrictions depending on whether there is an active outbreak in your community. Pay attention to what is going on in your context. Even more importantly, be sensitive to the needs of your whole community—if and when any "return" takes place, some of your members may be reluctant to attend large in-person gatherings for quite some time. Remember our obligation to care for those who are most vulnerable and be sure to attend upon those who are not yet "ready."

Third, **continue to be flexible and creative**. I have been amazed at the resilient and imaginative leadership exhibited throughout our Conference. That same, nimble leadership will be required for any return. It may be, for example, that a full "back to normal" cannot take place for a while, even as we ease our way into a new normal. It may further be that local outbreaks occur, or another wave of the pandemic occurs, and we have to return to where we are now. You and your leaders should be prepared for any and all possibilities (as hard as that may be!). Keep thinking, discerning, and praying.

Fourth, **please do not rush to turn back the clock.** Proceed carefully, cautiously, and with great wisdom and discernment. Restrictions on large gatherings are likely to be eased, not erased completely, so be mindful that while smaller gatherings may be possible, more care with larger gatherings will be needed. Some experts are recommending that it will be 18 months or longer before everything we've historically been accustomed to will find a new sense of normalcy. This is a marathon, not a sprint. With that in mind, ask yourselves which activities, programs, or ministries are most mission-critical to who we are. Prioritize your phased-in return with what is most essential to your mission and ministry. Avoid trying to do everything all at once.

Lastly, **do not neglect the lessons of this time.** Ask yourself what have you learned or what innovation you've discovered that you will want to carry forward. Nothing is wasted with God. I believe we are all discovering things about ourselves, about our communities, about mission and ministry that we would never have learned otherwise. Make sure that you find ways to carry those lessons and innovations forward. Be a better church moving forward, be a stronger community moving forward, be more faithful and more obedient to God and God's mission moving forward.

There are a number of additional resources (which we will be adding to our COVID-19 Resources Page), that provide helpful tips and guidelines about some more practical considerations for your planned "return" to in-person worship and ministries. I hope that you will consult those resources even as you make your own way during this uncertain time.

As always, I am grateful to serve alongside you, and welcome any questions or concerns you have.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Randall W. Partin', with a stylized, cursive script.

Randall W. Partin