

*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you,  
When you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
And the flame shall not consume you.  
For I am the Lord your God,  
The Holy One of Israel, your Savior. – Isaiah 43:2-3a*

To Our Parishioners, Staff, and Neighbors,

The words above from the prophet Isaiah are a welcome reminder during these uncertain times. It is because of our mutual trust in our Lord and Savior and our love for Mechanicsburg, that a group of pastors, and the churches we represent, have come together to provide support for one another, our school district, and the community. In the past few years we have combined our efforts to provide recreation and respite, food and meals, and support and prayers for our community, as we seek together to see God's will done on earth as it is in heaven.

This collegiality and effort have prepared us for such a time as this.

In mid-March when the decisions were made to shift worship services online and close church buildings, most of us thought and hoped we would return to "normal" in the next 6-8 weeks. We focused our energies on making sure our parishioners were cared for and connected, that our school families had food to eat, and that our worship services were accessible to those who had various forms of technology.

As time has passed, and we've been able to better understand the extended crisis that the nation is facing in COVID-19, we have begun the process of researching and reading, praying and discerning what the appropriate next steps for our worshiping communities should be.

As leaders of churches from denominations with varying backgrounds and traditions, our commitment is to seek unity in our shared faith in Jesus, rather than allowing our differences to divide us. Our current health crisis has strengthened our commitment to partnering together. As we have spoken and listened to God, to our boards, to our staffs, to our elected officials, and to our hearts, here are a few of the priorities that have risen to the top:

- 1) **SAFETY** – We are committed to taking appropriate measures to do our best to ensure the health and safety of every person in every activity related to our congregations. We are also committed to honoring and respecting elected officials, listening to the advice of health and science experts, and protecting the broader Mechanicsburg community.

While we are sympathetic to our faith communities' desire to resume worshipping together, we are also aware that our interactions as a church are not the same as in a business, and the ways in which we typically interact create a more pronounced risk.

We feel that even with the best of intentions, and doing everything possible to provide for all safety protocols, that it will be challenging to assure everyone's safety without significant changes that will disrupt our ability to minister to each other and worship with each other as a large group.

- 2) **HOSPITALITY** – We are committed to providing community, care, and comfort to our congregation members and our community of Mechanicsburg. We want as many as possible to participate in what we do. If we begin worshipping publicly before we can be welcoming to all those that choose to join us, who will we turn away or exclude? Will our children, or those who are intellectually disabled, or those with dementia understand the safety guidelines that we will have to put in place and how they are enforced? We prefer to consider ways in which we can create an atmosphere that feels welcoming to all.

Even though we are disappointed that our very familiar worship rhythms and routines have been interrupted for the foreseeable future, we are grateful, and awe inspired as we witness God doing a new thing with us and our community. Our online services have been welcomed in homes and we have all seen a rise in visitors and former members participating in these services. We have also seen the community rally to provide food for those who are food-insecure and other resources for those in need.

We all commit to continue to offer worship, Bible study, prayer, and pastoral care online; as well as continuing to connect in other ways with members and friends of our worshipping communities who do not have access to technology. We also commit to continue to work together to provide needed resources to the community.

- 3) **CLEAR COMMUNICATION** – As we move forward, we are committed to clearly communicating what we are doing and why we are doing it. We will work with our congregations to provide resources for gatherings that are meaningful and safe. We will do our best to communicate what we believe are best practices moving forward, keeping in mind that due to the nature of hot spots and flare ups of the virus that are expected, we will need to be flexible.

We will encourage our congregation members to continue to reach out to one another, their families, and friends. We will provide resources for those in our congregation and community that need physical, mental, financial, and/or emotional help.

While we share the above priorities, we are committed to extending grace to each other as individual congregations make their own prayerful decisions about when they will come together again in person for public worship and how they will establish and maintain protocols that protect their church family and the wider community.

As followers of Jesus, we believe that these three priorities – Safety, Hospitality, and Clear Communication – will allow us to move forward in a way that blesses others and keeps our congregation members and our community safe.

In the Gospels, Jesus told his followers that he had a new commandment for them to follow: *“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”* – John 13:34-35

May they know we are Christians by our love.

Reverend Tracy Conner, Mechanicsburg First Church of God  
Reverend Dr. Karen J. Durbin, Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Reverend Aaron Eardley, Trindle Spring Lutheran Church  
Reverend David Flowers, Grantham Brethren in Christ  
Reverend Marleen Griffith-Stull, St. Mark Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Reverend David Harper, Saint Luke’s Episcopal Church  
Reverend Ric Jacobs, Daybreak Church  
Reverend Kathryn Z. Johnston, Mechanicsburg Presbyterian Church  
Reverend Bobby Jones, Mt. Olivet United Methodist  
Reverend Del Keeney, Mechanicsburg Church of the Brethren  
Reverend Dr. Dennis Keller, First United Methodist Church  
Reverend William J. King, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish  
Reverend Dr. Layne Lebo, Mechanicsburg Brethren in Christ  
Reverend Alex Martini, St. Peter Lutheran Church  
Reverend Lynn Shertzer, Slate Hill Mennonite  
Reverend George Spangler, Turning Point Church  
Reverend John Ward-Diorio, St. Paul’s United Church of Christ  
Reverend Chad Wenger, Mechanicsburg Community Church