

Dear Ministers and Clerks of Session of the Presbytery of the Cascades,

We in the presbytery recognize that the Advent and Christmas season this year comes with special challenges. As a pastor, I remember all of the anticipation and extra preparation that went into the special worship services, concerts, mission activities, parties and neighborhood caroling that made the season sacred. I know that you will be finding new and creative ways to usher in the same spirit that our congregations have come to expect and enjoy. I also know that this year presents unique and overwhelming challenges as you try to honor the spirit of this season without the usual resources at your disposal.

I know that this season will exaggerate the anxiety many feel about returning to some form of normalcy. The yearning is deep. All of us would prefer to be rubbing elbows with each other while we sing, *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*. It won't be the same sharing Christmas cookies behind the flat screen of a Zoom coffee hour. *Silent Night* won't feel quite right without the passing of the "light of the Christ" between us as night falls on Christmas Eve.

Despite that, the presbytery continues to encourage you to refrain from in-person worship services in this time and to follow your state's guidelines and restrictions. The coronavirus is currently in its most deadly stage with projections that it will only get worse as we see spikes related to Thanksgiving and the December holiday season.

While we all would love to get back to our churches and our sanctuaries our faith calls us to something deeper—the love of and concern for our neighbor. Right now gathering in person continues to put our own members at risk as well as our neighbors and community.

I am including two links for the most recent restrictions put out by the states of Oregon and Washington. In Washington, there is a statewide set of restrictions that is effective through December 14. In Oregon, the state has now developed a system that shows the risk level (low risk, moderate risk, high risk, and extreme risk) for each county along with the restrictions that apply to those risk levels.

OREGON: https://coronavirus.oregon.gov/Pages/default.aspx?utm_source=GOV&utm_medium=egov_redirect&utm_campaign=https:%3A%2F%2Fgovstatus.egov.com%2Ffor-covid-19

WASHINGTON: <https://coronavirus.wa.gov/what-you-need-know/safe-start/whats-open-each-phase>

The Presbytery Leadership Commission has consistently used the guidance "what is permissible may not be advisable" when applying restrictions to our own individual churches. We have urged caution feeling strongly that we want to be part of the solution to this pandemic, faithful to our commitment to the most vulnerable among us, and because many of our members are in that "at risk" category.

The most difficult part of this email is acknowledging that none of us has a definite date when we can all return to in-person worship. This year Advent is not just a season, but a way of life. This is a pregnant time when the promise of new life is still on the horizon. So we wait, we prepare and we expect that God will show up in God's good time. That is what our faith calls us to.

This is a difficult time. But I am convinced that we are being transformed through this process. I am convinced that we will not go limping back to our church buildings when it is finally safe to return. I am convinced that we will emerge as new people embodying the presence of Christ in ways we could have never imagined. This is difficult. But so is pregnancy (according to my sources!). Something good is on the way. Believe it. Live into it.

Waiting, preparing and expecting with you...
Brian

Rev. Brian Heron
Presbyter for Vision and Mission
Presbytery of the Cascades
245 S Bancroft, Suite D
Portland, OR 97239
541.465.9173
www.cascadespresbytery.org