

March 16, 2020.

To Ministry Personnel and Church Leaders

Peace and grace to you in this unique and challenging time in the history of our world.

Your leadership during this time is very important to your congregations and the communities you serve. In many respects, you will be an essential service to your communities. We know it isn't easy, and are grateful for all that you have been doing and will be doing as this advances.

Yesterday some churches met for worship, and others closed, moving where possible to offering electronic broadcasts. We anticipate that by next Sunday, few congregations will gather, although there may be parts of the country that are exceptions. With schools in several provinces and public gatherings cancelled, most people are moving towards limiting social interactions outside their households to all but essential ones; it is prudent to suspend in-person worship or other gatherings in your churches. Even funerals might best be delayed until a later date, to minimize the opportunity for transmission of the virus.

This is a good time to try out other ways of connecting using the amazing electronic tools we have these days. Some of you have the capacity to conduct worship electronically and this experience has been very powerful. Not all congregations have this capacity, but the beauty of electronic tools is that they can be shared broadly, so please share your links..... and we will do our best to offer these links through our website too. It might be a good time to introduce some new practices to your congregation, to ensure continued connection with one another: perhaps prayer chains or call in lists. Share news of what you are doing on The United Church of Canada's Facebook page. The Moderator, and many of you, are preparing online worship and worship resources that you will find here. <https://www.united-church.ca/community-faith/being-community/worship-online-during-covid-19>

Some questions have been raised about continued pastoral relationships and employment as congregations suspend worship. Please remember that ministry personnel, in particular, will be on the front lines in our congregations and communities with pastoral care, supporting new ways to reach out to and care for each other and to "meet" for worship and reflection. This will be no "time off" for you. Where there are needs to provide pastoral care to very sick or dying members or neighbours in your communities, you will need to protect yourself and others by taking appropriate precautions. This will involve some difficult judgements but these are unusual times, and you have all of your members, and your family, to think of. Some guidance for congregations in regards to employment have been posted here. <https://www.united-church.ca/covid-19>

And we have made the difficult decision to send the General Council staff home to work from there until March 30. But they will continue to be available by email and at their usual phone extensions during regular hours throughout the weeks ahead.

Through all this, grace to you. We remember that God is with us, we are not alone. And we say, thanks be to God.

Nora Sanders
General Secretary, The United Church of Canada