



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

VIRGINIA CONFERENCE

POST OFFICE BOX 5606
10330 STAPLES MILL ROAD

GLEN ALLEN, VIRGINIA 23058-5606

Sharma D. Lewis
RESIDENT BISHOP

TELEPHONE: 804/521-1102
FAX: 804/521-1178
E-MAIL: terribiggins@vaumc.org

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In-Person Worship Can Continue During Advent and Christmas Day

Dear Virginia Annual Conference:

We are entering a blessed season fraught with challenges -- Advent amid rising COVID cases. This is a time for joy, celebration, and certainly caution with the utmost emphasis on safety.

Since the pandemic started, identifying and sharing information about how to worship safely has been one of the Conference's highest priorities. We have studied and listened to numerous health and safety experts to formulate the Technical Assistance Manual (TAM) which provides safe, clear, and reliable criteria for returning to in-person worship. In addition, the findings and recommendations from health and safety experts are monitored daily by our Back to In-person Worship Workgroup, the Cabinet, and me.

Healthy Church Teams throughout the Commonwealth have been formed to advise local clergy and to utilize the TAM to implement in-person worship that is most appropriate for their church community, such as drive-in worship, gathering in a sanctuary, or other means. Please understand that it is safe for our churches to have in-person worship services if you review your health before attending, wear your face covering, and socially distance in the service. On occasion, the local clergy have also made the wise but difficult decision to refrain from or to suspend in-person worship given the local context and are using online or telephonic services to continue worship. Please understand no church should feel pressured to have in-person worship, nor should any church rush into doing so.

We must continue to emphasize safety and always stay informed of the latest scientific findings and health recommendations. Simultaneously, we must avoid having a spirit of confusion, paranoia, and/or fear. As Paul tells us, "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" [2 Timothy 1:7].

I do not believe it is likely that circumstances will arise that will cause me to have to suspend in-person worship throughout the Conference. However, to reiterate, events will continue to be monitored. Local and regional outbreaks of COVID should also be monitored in case local clergy, in consultation with the Healthy Church Team and the District Superintendent, decide to suspend in-person worship. The Conference is ready to provide expertise and resources to help in this decision-making just as it has been doing since March.

To assist Healthy Church Teams in their assessments, the Back to In-Person Worship Workgroup has a new resource on its website at www.vaumc.org/return. ["Guidance for Healthy Church Teams on What](#)

[to Do in a COVID-19 Resurgence](#)” provides a step-by-step decision tree with helpful links to current information on the course of the pandemic in localities across Virginia.

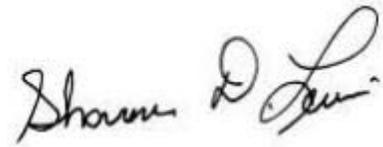
As we enter Advent on November 29, let us be reminded of the importance of worship in whatever form. Worship is about connecting sisters and brothers in Christ with our loving Creator, which also helps to provide the strength and peace to deal with life’s most pressing matters, including COVID.

I pray daily for the 314,000 members of our Conference, the nearly 1,600 clergy who serve them, and our more than 1,100 church communities. Let us all pray and reflect on the scripture above and live our lives in the spirit of power and not of fear, as we determine the best ways to worship in our various local churches.

We have been worshipping safely for months by having local churches implement the requirements in the TAM and we can continue to worship safely during this holiday season. Safety is paramount to me, the Cabinet, local clergy, and lay leaders and we will all continue to monitor issues associated with COVID on a state-wide, regional, and local level.

Thank you and best wishes to all for a Happy Thanksgiving and joyous Advent season.

Peace and Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sharma D. Lewis". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bishop Sharma D. Lewis