

To: The clergy and laity of the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church
From: The Virginia Conference Mission and Ministry Workgroup
November 18, 2020

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

On September 15, 2020, Bishop Sharma D. Lewis created the Mission and Ministry Workgroup to develop plans for in-person ministries beyond the scope of in-person worship services. Seeking to build upon the tireless work of the Back to In-Person Worship Workgroup, it has been our goal to provide resources and requirements for our faith communities to engage in ministry while promoting safety amidst the challenges of this season of COVID-19.

When Bishop Lewis created the Mission and Ministry Workgroup, she directed our initial focus to be within three categories of ministry: school partnerships; food and food events; and ministry with the homeless. The Bishop and Cabinet approved our work on November 4, 2020. However, on November 13, 2020, Governor Northam amended his Executive Order 67 with new restrictions on the number of people that could gather in non-worship service settings. As a general rule, these non-worship service gatherings are limited to 25 or less. It is against this backdrop that we submit our work thus far in these three areas.

For our purposes, we have divided **school partnerships** into two categories which we call “inside” and “outside” partnerships.” By definition, an “**inside**” partnership is a ministry where a congregation creates study space for students K-12 inside its facility. In this scenario, a congregation is allowing students to gather and participate in their virtual classroom in a safe environment where they are guided (not taught) by the staff and/or volunteers of that congregation. The document provided for “inside” partnerships is based on a pilot program hosted at Raleigh Court UMC in Roanoke.

An “**outside**” school partnership is one where a congregation partners with an outside organization to allow for space in the church facility to be rented or otherwise used by a group like a school system, individual school, or a group also partnering with the schools like the Boys and Girls Clubs. This document is still in development and in light of EO 67, we will need to reconsider how this outside partnership can work.

In the **food and food events** document, there are guidelines for three categories of food ministries: food pantries, food for offsite consumption, and food deliveries, which are explained in the food ministries document. The food pantries will not be affected by EO 67 because there is an exemption from the 25 and under requirement for programs that are assisting low income residents.

Congregations wishing to provide **homeless ministries** in their church facilities should contact their District Superintendent for documents that outline the required steps necessary for housing the homeless in this season of COVID-19. The homeless ministries are also not affected by EO 67 because they involve programs assisting low income residents.

If the HCT believes there is a ministry that meets the exemption from the 25 and under requirement, the HCT should contact the District Superintendent first to discuss it before putting together a plan for such a ministry. The exemption from the 25 and under requirement is a narrow one and we are sensitive to the fact that our Conference wants to serve this vulnerable population utilizing the five layers of mitigation listed above.

The structure of the documents produced by the Mission and Ministry Workgroup is based upon the “five layers of mitigation” to prevent the spread of COVID-19. These five layers are **sanitation, distancing, face coverings, health screenings, and ventilation**. In each category, your Healthy Church Team will find a series of questions, the answers to which will be the genesis of the plan requirements they will create for your ministry, subject to approval by the District Superintendent. While not an

exhaustive list, these questions should be helpful in thinking about how to do ministry safely in your particular context.

The documents provided by the Mission and Ministry Workgroup contain guidelines to help HCTs develop plans for ministry in this current context of pandemic. However, it is important to note that once plans have been approved by your District Superintendent, those plan terms are requirements that must be followed. **The plans you develop for these ministries must be submitted to your District Superintendent no less than fourteen (14) days before the date the ministry is set to begin so the DS has plenty of time to review, seek additional guidance from other experts, and obtain additional information from those proposing the ministry.**

The Mission and Ministry Workgroup will continue to develop and refine protocols for in-person ministries as we learn from the experiences of local churches and as we observe the progress of this pandemic in our Conference and beyond.

It is our prayer these documents enable you to continue to safely bless your congregation and community in these difficult days. Our goal was to make this work during this pandemic and we applaud the work that our churches in these much-needed ministries.

In Christ,

The Mission and Ministry Workgroup

Rev. Doug Forrester - Convener, District Superintendent, Roanoke District

Rev. RJ Jun - Clergy, Roanoke District

Rev. Beth Anderson - Clergy, Elizabeth River District

Steve Brown - Conference Chancellor, Richmond District

Rev. Steve Summers – Director of Connectional Ministries

Rev. Janet Knott – Clergy, Staunton District

Rev. Julie Nitzche – Clergy, Charlottesville District

Marie Coone – Lay, Richmond District

Rev. Sarah Calvert - District Superintendent, Arlington District

Heather Gomez – Lay, Harrisonburg District

Rev. Joshua King – Clergy, Winchester District

Larry Baucom - Lay, Elizabeth River District

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.

- Hebrews 10:23