

**JULY 7, 2020**

**A MESSAGE FROM OUR BISHOP**

Dear North Georgia United Methodists,

Last week Governor Kemp extended Georgia's Public Health State of Emergency and has banned gatherings of more than 50 people unless there is at least 6 feet of space between each person. (Read all executive orders at <https://gov.georgia.gov/executive-action/executive-orders/2020-executive-orders>)

We know that many of you have worked for weeks developing a plan for how to gather for in-person worship.

In light of the dramatic increases in COVID-19 throughout our region, we encourage you to review your plan considering these rising numbers. Churches in areas with rapidly increasing cases should prayerfully consider pausing plans to gather in-person until the numbers go down. Those in doubt should err on the side of safety.

**The website [globalepidemics.org](https://globalepidemics.org) offers a county-level risk assessment. We urge you not to gather if your county is red or orange-level risk and to take extreme care where there is a yellow-level risk.**

We encourage and support you:

- If you have resumed in-person worship, but because of an increase of cases in your area you feel you need to pause and return to online worship.
- If you are considering gathering in person in July but feel you need to delay reopening.
- If you plan on focusing on online worship and stewardship for the foreseeable future.

For churches that are planning on gathering in-person for worship, we emphasize that congregational singing is extremely dangerous and that choirs should not be part of worship at this time. We reiterate the guidelines we have released (<https://www.ngumc.org/guidelines-and-consideration-for-in-person-worship>). Three variables to consider are:

- *People:* Confidence that members will be disciplined about social distancing (from car, to entering, to exiting, to return to car), wearing masks, and hand hygiene. Reports indicate that this might be the most critical variable.
- *Place:* The size and configuration of the space. Note that for many churches 25 or fewer is a safer number.
- *Things:* Availability of supplies (masks/hand sanitizer).

Inside gatherings of any size should be held only where the demographics, facilities, and the actual practices of members can reasonably mitigate the spread of the virus. If you want to talk this over with someone, please don't hesitate to reach out to your District Superintendent or Conference Staff.

Our prayers are with you as we navigate how to share God's love in the communities we serve in ever-changing circumstances.

*Bishop Sue Hauptert-Johnson*

*The Extended Cabinet of the North Georgia Conference*