



A Pastoral Note from Rev. Stephanie

In Response to Governor Hogan's Announcement, and Emmanuel's Plans for In -Person Gatherings

I am glad that Jesus works the night shift, because I keep having conversations with Him in the middle of the night. Last night I was up talking to Jesus about Governor Hogan's announcement on May 13th, that starting this weekend, faith communities have permission to hold indoor worship services at 50% capacity if they have all the necessary protocols for social distancing, rigorous cleaning, mandatory face masks, and so on, in place.

I am grateful for the courageous leadership of our Governor and I understand that he and the public servants who work at all levels of government are making hard decisions in good faith, but that announcement came as a shock to me and my colleagues. We have been working to create guidelines for reopening using the Governor's Phase One reopening guidelines which allowed only outdoor worship gatherings with all the safety protocols in force. Last night, many pastors were up late writing letters to their congregations about why we will not be having worship in our sanctuaries this Sunday. I decided not to write a letter last night and went to bed.

I woke up at 2 AM this morning with my mind full of thoughts about how can we, as a beloved community, make decisions that will keep us safe?

What will keep us safe? As a pastor with degrees in theology, I don't have much to say in answer to this question beyond what I can glean from experts. Doctors, epidemiologists, and public health officials can share what keeps people safe from a deadly virus. Psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and sociologists can help us figure out what keeps our spirits and social structures safe during a time like this. Economists can point to ways to maintain financial safety during such a disruption. I'm no expert on what keeps us safe. But there is an underlying question here - an essential question: ***Who is "us"?***

This second question—that's where I come in. As a professional interpreter of the Bible and as a person committed to following Jesus, I have some firm beliefs about ***Who is "us"?***

If the earliest church leaders are to be believed, "us" is every single person created in the image of God—which is every person. "Us" is Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female (Galatians 3:28) —people of every religion, race and ethnicity; every social and economic class; every gender.

And if Jesus is to be believed and followed, those concerned about "us" must especially pay attention to those most often excluded from power and privilege: those who experience racial oppression, those who are poor, those who are sick, those with disabilities, women, children . . .

What will keep us safe?

Whatever will keep black men jogging in suburban neighborhoods safe.

Whatever will keep children with diminished access to school meals and supportive adults safe.

Whatever will keep our 90-year-old church members and our members with chronic health conditions safe.

Whatever will keep the bus drivers and grocery store clerks and those who have lost their jobs and those too stressed to do their jobs safe.

Whatever will keep the doctors, nurses, and all the staff of hospitals, retirement and assisted living centers and healthcare facilities safe.

I do not know the full answer to “*What will keep us safe?*” but I do know that we have to make sure the “us” in that question includes all of us.

Emmanuel UMC is nowhere near ready to resume in-person worship gatherings, inside or outside. This is not a matter of poor planning or unpreparedness on our part. The staff and leadership of Emmanuel have been working hard to carefully think through what will keep us safe, while also continuing to be Church through our virtual gatherings.

We are all aching to see you in person, but that will take place with careful planning sometime in the future.

Please continue to join us in virtual, online worship on Sunday and in the variety of small groups we are offering. You can find all that information on our website at www.eumclaurel.org.

Stay safe, Beloved Ones,

Rev. Stephanie Vader, Senior Pastor