



**Board of Bishops** Linda J. Adams | D. Keith Cowart | Matthew H. Whitehead

### *Free Methodist Family,*

Greetings in the name of the Lord Jesus! As governmental agencies consider gradually walking back physical distancing measures in place to limit the scope of the COVID-19 pandemic, we want to offer some guidance for our congregations, camps, ministries, and members as we enter the next phase of managing our present realities:

**Lead with Love.** The Love of God should define us and our actions in this historic moment. Our love for each other and for those in the world around us will be what causes us to stand out in this time and point others to Jesus (John 13:35 & 3:16 and Romans 12:9-11). Emotions are running high as we all tire of the losses we are experiencing. People are watching how the church will respond under the pressure of these times and we will be judged by the love and generosity evident in our actions. Words alone will not be sufficient, but deeds that demonstrate the love of Jesus will speak powerfully. This is a moment for *warm hearts and cool heads* as we consider the best path forward. We all wish things could return to “normal”, but this pandemic has fundamentally shifted our culture and continues to do so in ways we don’t yet understand. Looking back, we will all be experts on the change, but right now, not so much. We need to lead with love and show extra wisdom and grace proceeding with caution and praying that the Lord will help us to all be humble, gracious, respectful and kind in our responses and positions we take during this crisis. Let’s lead with love and put the interests of others before our own (Romans 12:9-11) showing them the love of Jesus. We all want to get back to regular in-person meetings, but depending on our context, we may need to lay that need down for the health and safety of our neighbors and the more vulnerable among us.

**Take Thoughtful Steps Forward.** We all wish we could have definitive answers and a set timeline guide as we enter this new season of response. However, there is no way to establish a specific universal process as the context varies widely in each of our settings, so each congregation, camp, or ministry will need to develop a plan in close cooperation with their conference. These are the things we can provide direction on for all our Free Methodist Family:

- 1) **Superintendents will provide the leadership for their conferences** regarding the specific timelines and conditions for the resumption of gatherings and use of church buildings in the coming season. In all cases, they will follow or exceed local and state government restrictions. These could vary widely even within states or conferences and elders are advised to follow the leadership of their superintendents. In some cases, it may be legal to gather, but not wise to do so given the moral, financial, or legal risks associated with doing so. Pressure may come from church members or even elders to commence gatherings or open church building prematurely. Follow your superintendent’s lead whether or not you fully agree and remind people that Jesus regularly modeled laying down his own interests for the sake of others and we should do the same.



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- 2) Pastors and local church leaders are encouraged to **engage in a thorough and thoughtful process of planning and preparation** to:
  - a. Design and evaluate missional advances and ministry opportunities in your community. The current limitations do not hinder our ability to be effective in the mission. Be prayerfully creative, look at what resources you have, and redesign ministry approaches for the current realities. We can be effective and see significant kingdom growth even in the midst of this trial, if we listen to the Holy Spirit and adjust our methods for the season at hand.
  - b. Access resources to help you think through specifics and that challenge your thinking. There are many good resources available. Superintendents can point you to recommended sources for your context. Here are some resources to get you started: we recommend the [article we shared last week](#) which provides questions to consider, [this guide](#) created by a local church, and [this article](#) by Ed Stetzer as a place to start your process.
  - c. Be generous with your encouragement, love, prayers, ideas, and resources. Live by faith, not in fear, and see what God will do with the seed of generosity you sow; and
  - d. Prepare for the long haul. This recovery will occur in phases over time. Don't press pause and wait for things to return to "normal." Make disciples, adjust your model, use every tool at your disposal to advance the kingdom, do justice, and serve the poor and vulnerable among us. As we do, the kingdom will advance, and we will be better positioned on the other side of this; and
  - e. Consider ways to protect the interests of the vulnerable in your community and by reducing the legal, health, and liability risks in your planning and preparations. Be judicious in the intentional application of public safety protocols combined with an acute awareness of public scrutiny as you begin to reopen your building or hold gatherings. Some churches became hot spots for the initial outbreaks of the virus in the US with devastating consequences. Churches who do not consider the full ramifications of decisions could be responsible for the dreaded "second wave" of infections. Please lead with love and use caution.

**Respond Personally in Mission.** Jesus is asking all of us to respond in this moment as ambassadors of Christ, as member of his body, and as his presence in the earth. We can't just respond in abstract or organizationally. Each member or elder in the Free Methodist family must take personal action in obedience to Jesus as he is calling you to respond to this crisis. Brian Schiller, in [his recent article](#), encouraged readers to think about how they can take selfless, Christ-like action in this time. We adapted his three questions for your consideration:



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1. How does my calendar or to-do list include helping others?
2. This month, what of my personal income is designated for others above and beyond what I have done in the past? Am I considering my neighbors, the poor, and the global church?
3. In prayer, what inclusions do I have beyond family, friends, and church? Who am I praying for to become followers of Jesus?

**Be Encouraged.** Even though our church buildings need to be reopened, the church is alive and well. We have been deployed. Our mission is not merely gatherings, it is loving God, loving people, and making disciples. While large in-person gatherings are wonderful and important to our collective identity in Christ, they are not essential. We can gather virtually, in smaller groups as allowed, even if restricted to family groups, and we will know that where two or three are gathered, Jesus is present. We can accomplish the mission even under our current limitations.

Let's not focus on what we lack, but on what we have been given. Just as in the story of the feeding of the five thousand, what we have been given might not look like much, but it is more than enough with Jesus to meet the need. Let's trust Jesus with what we have and go for it! The gates of hell cannot prevail against the church and the current restrictions can't prevent the spread of the gospel in discipleship or in acts of love. If large gatherings do not resume for some time, we can still thrive in the mission of Jesus and witness exponential growth.

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." John 16: 33 NIV

In closing, let us share with you how proud we are by the responses of the leaders and people called Free Methodists during this pandemic. Reports from all across the country have come to us about the love of Christ being expressed in tangible ways in these days. The level of focused energy, creativity and innovation has contributed to an exponential increase of ministry in our communities and around the world. Tens of thousands of people across the world have attended online prayer meetings, worship gatherings, Bible studies and discipleship bands. Clearly God is doing a new work among us. Thank you for your faithful and fruitful leadership in these days of opportunity.

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4/30/2020