April 1, 2020

Dear Colleagues,

The more I read about the Skagit Valley Chorale in Washington State, it seems clearer to me that people should not gather in person. Early in March their Board of Directors made the decision to have practice since there were no confirmed cases of COVID-19 in their area. They did encourage those that were not feeling well to stay home. 56 of their members showed up, and they took precautions of having hand sanitizer available and practicing social distancing. Within a few days, 45 out of 56 of those members had contracted COVID-19. 11 days after the rehearsal, the first member died, with the second the day after that. Three were hospitalized.

According to the local newspaper: “Howard Leibrand, Skagit County’s health officer said this cluster of cases shows how easily the virus can spread. “To our knowledge, no one who was there was symptomatic.” The precautions taken at the meeting with increased hand washing and maintaining distance from each other are generally in line with what the county had recommended. “But that wasn’t enough in this case,” Leibrand said.

Greg Abbott, the Governor of Texas, issued an executive order yesterday that said that “essential services” shall consist of everything listed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security in its Guidance on the Essential Critical Infrastructure Workforce, Version 2.0, plus religious services conducted in churches, congregations, and houses of worship. If religious services cannot be conducted from home or through remote service, they should be conducted consistent with the Guidelines from the President and the CDC by practicing good hygiene, environmental cleanliness, and sanitation, and by implementing social distancing to prevent the spread of COVID-19.”

I realize that Texas is a BIG state, and there are many areas where there may not be confirmed cases of COVID-19. That is not the case here in the
geography of the Presbytery of New Covenant. As a local health official told me last week regarding gathering for worship, “Just because you can, doesn’t mean you should.” I strongly encourage you to find ways to gather for worship that do not include face to face contact. Many of our congregations are using technology such as Facebook Live, Zoom, and YouTube.

For those congregations that are facing financial challenges, the presbytery is offering a grant of $150 per congregation to purchase a Zoom Pro account for a year. This can enable you to meet for worship, business and fellowship. Please register and pay for the account, and send me a copy of your receipt. We will reimburse you for the purchase.

The health and well-being of our members should be of utmost importance during this time. In our polity, worship is under the purview of the Session of the church who also serve as the spiritual leaders of the congregation. As the General Presbyter and Stated Clerk for Administrative Process, I cannot tell you not to meet. However, I can encourage you to make good decisions, listening to your local authorities, and not putting the lives of those you love and care about at risk during this time of COVID-19. Our Committee on Ministry agrees, and voted yesterday for me to send this communication. Rev. Ted Foote, the COM moderator, has reviewed it, and given his “stamp of approval.”

By the way, the place where the Skagit Valley Chorale meets for rehearsal is a member of the PC(USA).

May you find peace in the days ahead!

With gratitude,

Lynn

Rev. Lynn R. Hargrove
General Presbyter + Stated Clerk for Administrative Process