



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
HARRISBURG AREA – SUSQUEHANNA CONFERENCE

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*The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined. (Isaiah 9:2)*

Dear Sisters and Brothers of the Susquehanna Conference,

Grace to you in the name of Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace, Healer of our Brokenness, and Hope of the World!

As we experience every year, Advent is a season of waiting. When Luke tells the story of Christmas, he first reminds us of John the Baptist's birth. Zechariah has waited many years for a child. He is an old man when he learns that he will have a son, one with a special mission. Soon thereafter Mary hears that she, too, will bear a child, who will be called the Son of the Most High (Luke 1:32). And then follows more waiting.

This entire year has felt like one endless wait. For many it has been spiritually draining. Yet God's people have been here before, and each time, God has brought us to a new place of promise and hope.

We are all keenly aware that the numbers of COVID-19 cases are still increasing rapidly. Many of the hospitals throughout Pennsylvania and our country are experiencing a serious rise in admitting COVID patients. Our district superintendents are reporting that more and more of our pastors and laypeople have tested positive for COVID. As health officials strongly believe that even more people will succumb to COVID during this post-Thanksgiving season, the full Cabinet and I are deeply troubled and greatly concerned for the health and safety of our people.

**This is a very grave situation that requires a sacrificial response. For your safety and that of your friends, family, and neighbors, I, as bishop, along with the full Cabinet urge you to not conduct indoor in-person worship or gatherings for the rest of the year.**

My sisters and brothers in faith, I know this is very difficult to hear. I know that not everyone wants to pause in-person worship, especially during Advent. Calls for a temporary break from public gatherings may feel like a threat to our religious freedom. But now we must put our preferences aside and do what is best for our faith communities and the larger communities in which we live.

We must work together to stop the spread of this disease. We must do all that we can to make sure that more people do not fall victim to COVID. I firmly believe this is our calling, for such a time as this.

You have done ministry in wonderful ways during this pandemic, such as through online worship, Bible study, and ministry, as well as outdoor opportunities for worship and ministry. Please continue those excellent expressions of faithfulness while not meeting in person indoors. We have provided some ideas on how to worship and minister safely during the pandemic. You can find them at [susumc.org/worship-resources](http://susumc.org/worship-resources).

The Psalmist says, "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes in the morning" (Psalm 30:5). It feels like we are in a dark night of COVID. However, our God has not abandoned us. God is providing new and different ways to be in ministry. The joy of gathering together will come again. But for now, I implore you to suspend indoor in-person worship and gatherings.

We just lighted the first Advent candle this past Sunday, the candle of hope. In the midst of long haul of COVID fatigue, we become weary and tired and the flame of hope within us may be flickering. As I try to keep hope alive, I am reminded of a song that I used to sing a lot when I was in school in Korea. It's called, "Whispering Hope."

"Soft as the voice of an angel, breathing a lesson unheard,  
Hope with a gentle persuasion whisper her comforting word:  
Wait till the darkness is over, wait till the tempest is done.  
Hope for the sunshine tomorrow, after the shower is gone.  
(Refrain) Whispering hope. Oh how welcome thy voice,  
Making my heart in its sorrow rejoice.  
If, in the dusk of the twilight, dim be the region afar.  
Will not the deepening darkness brighten the glimmering star?  
Then when the night is upon us, why should the heart sink away?  
When the dark midnight is over, watch for the breaking of day."

"We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure" (Hebrews 6:19). This is the time and we are the people to whisper hope to one another. God is faithful and God's love is steadfast and endures forever. We earnestly await a vaccine and surely it will arrive.

God's light through Jesus Christ our Savior shines bright on us. May our light so shine to all people that they see that we care for them deeply; so deeply that we are willing to pause in-person gatherings as a sign of our love of God and neighbor as we keep whispering hope.

In Ministry with You,



Jeremiah J. Park

Rev. Dr. Paul Amara, Williamsport District  
Rev. Catherine Boileau, York District  
Ms. Joyce Davis, Conference Lay Leader  
Mr. Mark Knecht, Conference Treasurer and Benefits Officer  
Rev. Brenda K. Leigey, State College District  
Rev. Victoria Rebeck, Director of Connecting Ministries  
Rev. Barry Robison, Harrisburg District  
Rev. Dr. Tom Salsgiver, Assistant to the Bishop  
Rev. Gary Shockley, Director of Equipping Vital Congregations  
Rev. Judy L. Walker, Scranton/Wilkes-Barre District  
Rev. Dr. Gary D. Weaver, Lewisburg District  
Rev. Dr. Joleen A. Willis, Altoona District  
Rev. Kevin Witt, Director of Growing Spiritual Transformational Leaders