



GREAT PLAINS ANNUAL CONFERENCE of The United Methodist Church

REV. DR. RUBEN SAENZ JR., *Resident Bishop*

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Feb. 11, 2021

Dear Clergy and Laity of the Great Plains Conference,

The peace of Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

I am writing to encourage our United Methodist churches in Kansas and Nebraska to resume in-person worship — while continuing to exercise an abundance of caution — as we prepare to begin our 2021 Lenten journey with Ash Wednesday this Feb. 17, followed by Holy Week and Easter.

As the deer pants for water, so our souls yearn for worship in person to drink deeply from the fullness of God's means of grace through hymns and songs of praise, prayers, sermons, the sacrament of Holy Communion, and Christian fellowship.

Churches in counties still with "high" or "uncontrolled" rates of infection may decide to continue to worship exclusively online for the well-being of their members' safety. Churches in counties that are in the moderate or low-risk infection rates should consider resuming in-person services with the following requirements:

- Masks are to be worn by everyone, except children 2 years and younger.
- Strict physical distancing of 6 feet between family units should be observed.
- Gathering spaces should not exceed 25% occupancy.
- Enough services should be offered to ensure a maximum of 25% occupancy, 6 feet of physical distancing between family units, and the gathering space sanitized between services to ensure public safety.

Some regular attendees of worship services may not return until they have received one of the vaccines now being rolled out across the country. Nevertheless, we are encouraged because infection rates and hospitalizations are steadily dropping and the news about timelines for increased distribution and administration of the vaccine is more hopeful with each passing day.

Isolation, tensions, and uncertainties created by the pandemic continue to take a toll on the overall health of our nation. We all want to be with other people, to interact with others outside our families, and to rejoin with our church communities and the larger community. I invite churches during this season of Lent to think of themselves as places and spaces for healing, not just of body, but especially of mind, emotions, relationships, and spirits. Corporate worship experiences, and all the means of God's grace we receive through them, function as a balm of help, hope, and healing for a pandemic-weary world.

In closing, thank you for all the ways you make Christ's outreaching love known to a hurting world. You are providing ways for people to worship, pray, and study the Bible through online programming on Facebook and other mediums that nurture and sustain connection with God and each other amid isolation. You are feeding the hungry, assisting local schools, gathering and distributing clothing, and

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passionately addressing matters of social justice. Please continue to livestream and record your services for the people in your community and beyond that may now be among your regular online attendees.

Your loyalty to Christ as his disciple, to your local church community, the mission of The United Methodist Church, and your neighbors is a hopeful sign of God's abiding presence, care, and love in the world.

Grace and peace,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Ruben Saenz Jr.", with a stylized, cursive script.

Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr.

P.S. — Find out about your county's COVID-19 status by going to the following websites:

- [COVID-19 Cases in Kansas](#)
- [Coronavirus COVID-19 Nebraska Cases by the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services \(DHHS\)](#)

Please reach out to Rev. Hollie Tapley, conference disaster response coordinator, at htapley@greatplainsumc.org with any questions you may have about COVID-19 and related safety measures.