

If I were to say to you that the challenging times we're living in has brought us enormous frustrations, caused us to feel uncalculated losses and wreaked havoc with our emotions and our relational connections...you would probably get a snide smirk on your face and say sarcastically, "Oh really. You don't say!"

It has been tough trying to assimilate the old information with the constant influx of new information regarding the COVID-19 virus and its impact personally and socially. On all of our minds is the question, "When will we re-open Skipwith UMC and get back to in-person worship and Ministry?" The answer: probably not before September.

As your pastor, I have been diligently studying the Virginia Conference Guidelines that govern how and when we re-open. As the month of June began and our posted time of cancellation for in-person activities was quickly closing in, I made an executive decision for us not to re-open this summer. In large part, here is my rationale:

- 1) Our Healthy Church Team (HCT), required by the Conference Guidelines to facilitate any and all re-opening efforts, had not yet been formed. Our team began meeting June 17th.
- 2) Only two churches in the whole Richmond District were attempting to move forward with in-person worship. (In fact, only 126 of the 1350 churches in the entire Virginia Conference were doing drive-in worship or in-person worship in the building.)
- 3) A decision needed to be made to inform the wide-array of groups who utilize space in our church. Numerous calls were coming in.

Our safety, and the safety of all those we love, is my highest priority and concern. The COVID-19 virus is real. It's highly contagious and a devastating disease. It spreads fastest in closed spaces with large groups. As of this writing, in Virginia there have been 55,000 confirmed cases and 1552 deaths; in the U.S. there have been 2.15 million cases and 117,700 deaths. Globally there have

- 1) been 8 million cases and 433,800 deaths.
- 2) Before I made the executive decision for Skipwith, I spoke with a number of my clergy colleagues (only a few had formed their Healthy Church Team) regarding their summer plans, and none were planning any summer in-person worship.
- 3) Finally, I spoke with a number of our Skipwith church leaders, informally, about the requirements and restrictions that would have to be in place and followed,

as outlined by the Virginia Conference Guidelines...and I was convinced that we could accomplish more of our desired worship and connection goals by continuing with our weekly Zoom Worship Experiences through the summer months.

I ask you to trust me. Over the past four years, you know it has not been my modus operandi (mode of operation) to decide and act alone. We were coming to the end of our announced cancellations and a decision needed to be made. I know it's frustrating when things move slowly, but it is necessary in the current climate. Plus, if our Healthy Church Team determines that we can get everything that is required in place, and that it is safe and that it makes sense, then we can re-open before the summer concludes and it will be an exciting and welcome surprise!

We're going to get through this. Until then, stay connected with each other. Pray for me. Build one another up. Don't give in to despair. Overcome evil with your good and loving actions of compassion and solidarity.

Come, Holy Spirit. Come!

~Pastor T. Todd Smith