



GREAT PLAINS ANNUAL CONFERENCE of The United Methodist Church

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

1207 SW Executive Drive
Topeka, KS 66615
800-745-2350
785-414-4299
bishop@greatplainsumc.org

Dear Pastors of the Great Plains Conference,

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May the peace of Jesus Christ be with you in all ways.

I wanted to take a few moments to affirm the wonderful ministries you are leading within your mission fields as we stay safe in place amid COVID-19 restrictions. It warms my heart to hear the many ways you are serving people who are grieving the loss of loved ones, struggling with health concerns, job loss, general anxiety, and even just the cabin fever that comes with staying home.

I shared some information with the Connecting Council during our video-conference meeting April 18 that I now share with you so that you have correct and pertinent details as to the state of the Great Plains Conference and where we go from here.

Local Church Vitality

Our churches are finding creative ways to provide much-needed goods and services for their communities, such as the dispensation of food to the growing number of people in need because of business closures, reduced wages, furloughs, and job layoffs. Some of our churches are making masks for essential workers. Our churches are adapting to make use of technology for worship and to stay connected. One church donated and altered their choir robes for use as Personal Protection Equipment for medical personnel. Our churches are creating Christian formation resources for families. Many are working ecumenically to serve their communities. And in some instances, our churches are even going "old school" by writing letters to people in nursing and assisted living homes, reminding them that they are beloved children of God.

I recognize we face significant immediate and long-term challenges. We had many churches that did not have social media and streaming platforms in place before this crisis, leaving them somewhat unequipped to stay connected. A number of our churches now have the hardware and software to livestream online worship services, Bible studies, and conduct business. Many churches are operating financially week-to-week or are facing heavy debt loads; they will encounter significant economic struggles. Some churches already have cut back on staff.

I believe now is the right time for local churches, regardless of their numerical size, to organize themselves into groups of 10 to 12 adults for mutual accountability to faithful discipleship and mission. A spiritual leader chosen from within the small group will be responsible for staying in contact with the rest of the group members, organize pastoral care for members of the group as needed, and coordinate the group's mission within the local church and to the community. The spiritual leaders will stay in touch with the pastor for equipping, guidance, and support.

If ever there was an opportunity to push a "reset" button, this is it. Now is the right time for local churches to reimagine their vision, set new priorities, and revise strategies to relaunch our ministries after the COVID-19 restrictions end. Now is the time to ask ourselves, what new things are we learning? What can we incorporate into our ministry moving forward? How will we be more aligned with the mind and mission of Christ's outreaching love for our world that affirms the worth of all humanity and the value of the interrelationship in all of God's creation? Let's ask those questions now so we have answers and implementable action plans ready when the time comes to reboot our ministries.



Church Gatherings

The Great Plains Conference clergy and congregations will follow the life-saving safer-in-place directives from the CDC, local public health experts, and state and local officials.

Pressure mounts on federal, state, and local governments to begin lifting coronavirus restrictions in efforts to restart the economy. Governors have issued various plans to reopen their states dependent on several factors, including the growth rate of confirmed COVID-19 cases, the death rate, and the number of hospitalizations in each state. There is no superseding federal, state, or local order that applies across the board because there is a variance in the impact of the virus in different areas and, more particularly, our two great states. State leaders are working to increase testing capabilities for our communities to have better information to inform decisions that will eventually lead to the complete revocation of coronavirus restrictions. No one is declaring victory over the virus, but the groundwork for recovery is underway.

Social-gathering sizes guidelines, which include church gatherings, will gradually increase in phases over several months beginning May 1 for Nebraska and May 4 for Kansas. Gathering-size restrictions, safe-distancing guidelines, and sanitation recommendations will impact our larger congregations more than our smaller ones. For now, churches with an average worship attendance of more than 50 should continue to hold online worship services and record from home or the sanctuary with a small group of people. If a church chooses to have multiple services, several preparations must be made. There must be a plan for managing the number of people per service and a plan to safeguard contact behaviors and rituals (seating, communion, baptism, passing offering plates, singing, fellowship, passing the peace, after-church receiving lines, handing out bulletins, etc.). Churches that choose to gather must provide personal protection equipment such as gloves, masks and hand sanitizer, and disinfect surfaces between services. A plan should carefully consider the safety of children in nursery care, and there should be a plan for informing the congregation about the scheduling of different worship times, restrictions, and expectations.

There will come a time when all gathering-size restrictions are lifted. However, we must anticipate that our lives and timelines will be shaped for at least the next year by the behavior of COVID-19. If at any time within a recovery stage COVID-19 cases significantly rise, a reversal to the previous step may be necessary. When we do meet, we will practice public safety recommendations for safe distancing, disinfecting spaces, and for other contact behaviors particular to the church-gathering experience. The directed health measures we take are meant to ensure the safety of our congregations, especially our older adults and people of any age who have serious underlying medical conditions who might be at higher risk. I do not want to increase fear, but gathering in closed quarters, singing, our contact rituals, and decreased ventilation in our gathering spaces creates a ripe environment for viral transmission. I strongly urge you to err on the side of caution. To gather in person or not for worship at this time is not a matter of faith vs. faithlessness, or about some conspiracy to suppress Christianity; this is about honoring and doing our part individually and collectively to protect God's sacred gift of life, especially for the most vulnerable in our communities and our world. Understand your insurance's liability and coverage policy in the event an outbreak is linked to a gathering of your local congregation. Check with your local health officials, and look to our conference website for continual updates regarding church gathering guidelines and recommendations at www.greatplainsumc.org/coronavirus.

Appointments

The cabinet and I set 95% of our full-time appointments by the first week of April, and our district superintendents have been introducing new pastors to their Staff-Pastor-Parish Relations Committees via Zoom. July 1 is still the start date for pastors in their new appointments. The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry recently issued guidance as to how we can move newly licensed persons and clergy approved for ordination into their new appointments in the absence of an annual conference clergy session and ordination worship service before July 1. We are confident that we will not see an interruption of this process.

I fully recognize we face some financial risks as we emerge from this health crisis. Full-time level compensation appointments are vulnerable if church economies decline and do not recover. Our Administrative Services team, Conference Personnel Committee, the CF&A, Cabinet, and I are working on activation protocols for temporary subsidies to sustain, if needed, minimal compensation support for associate members, and provisional and full elders in full-time appointments. Such action will require intense cooperation with the local congregation, including the disclosure of available undesignated reserves from which to draw funding for a pastor's salary. With 87 of our clergy at the minimum-compensation level and many more near that mark, I must be clear that the conference will be the last resort in these efforts. I will communicate how we are doing on these matters as the situation develops. Look to our conference website for the latest information about church finances and grants at www.greatplainsumc.org/financefridays, where our Administrative Services team will share information provided in its noon Friday webinars.

Clergy Support

The conference staff has been working diligently to provide the resources you are requesting. In some cases, we have anticipated your need beforehand.

Thank you for taking the time to fill out a survey sent by Scott Brewer, our treasurer and director of Administrative Services. These monthly surveys may seem tedious to you, but they help me and the conference staff to provide resources to enhance your well-being and your church's vitality. The monthly status updates will help us develop resources to equip your leadership and improve your SPRCs support for you and your families.

What do we do next as clergy?

I believe now is the time to care for our close relationships, our spiritual life, and our health. I encourage you to mindfully attend to your loved ones and your primary relationships. I encourage you to practice your spiritual disciplines of prayer, study, and journaling. And I encourage you to care for your physical, emotional, and mental well-being with healthy practices.

Conferences

As you know, the General Conference scheduled for May has been postponed, with tentative revised dates being Aug. 31-Sept. 10, 2021. The jurisdictional conference, where we elect new bishops, is also delayed until 2021. Bishops scheduled to retire will continue to serve in their respective episcopal areas through Jan. 1, 2022.

The agreements in the Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation will remain in place until the General Conference meets in 2021.

Some people have asked if the delay in General Conference will lead to a re-opening of the opportunity to submit legislation. I anticipate there may be some new concerns that arise between now and the new 2021 date, but it's too early to tell if there will be an opening to offer new legislation. Please watch the conference website. We'll post information there as it becomes available.

The coronavirus also impacted our Great Plains Annual Conference session. Instead of a face-to-face annual conference meeting, we are planning a one-day teleconference for Saturday, May 30, to handle essential business items. We are finalizing details and will have that information to you by May 12. We had planned a special session of the annual conference for Oct. 1-3 in Grand Island, Nebraska, to work through matters after the General Conference. We now plan to expand that meeting to Oct. 1-4. I will share the focus and scope of the call for the October meeting by July 1. As you examine those dates, you will notice our annual conference will go through Sunday, Oct. 4, to accommodate more laity, including our youth and young adults, who likely will be in classes during weekdays in October. I will provide a video-recorded sermon for use on Sunday, Oct. 4, should you choose to use it, to allow you to attend the entire annual conference session.

God's Amazing Grace

Friends, we face many unprecedented unknowns in the days and months to come — personally, as families, as a church, as communities, as a nation, and as members of a global community. Many of us are already experiencing a direct impact of COVID-19 because we have not been able to be by the side of a loved one who is alone, sick, in trouble, or has died. Some of us have loved ones who are now unemployed, we're tutoring our children, and we have loved ones that are putting their lives at risk as health care and essential employees. Some of us have lost loved ones to death directly because of COVID-19. We are all desperate for a return to some normality. At the same time, we know that like generations that lived through national traumas we will see and be in the world differently than before.

My hope is that we will emerge from this pandemic with more humility about our own vulnerabilities, as a more grateful people, more prayerful, more generous, and more aware and appreciative of our interdependence as a human community. Coming through many dangers, trials, toils, and snares together leads us to trust in God's amazing grace, assurance, consolation, and hope. Times like these drive us into the presence of God with our fears and worries as we prayerfully seek Christ's wholeness and peace that guards our hearts and minds.

Lastly but in no ways least, although we cannot yet physically meet together as churches of the Great Plains Conference, we can meet together in prayer. I ask that you invite your congregation to pray the Lord's Prayer at noon until all gathering restrictions are lifted in the United States, and we can meet together again as churches. This act of solidarity will keep us prayerfully connected. It takes less than 30 seconds to pray the Lord's Prayer, but doing so will unite us with Christ, with each other, and it will change the world. I thank you in advance for calling and leading your congregation to pray daily at noon.

I'm proud to be your bishop and proud that you are serving in the Great Plains Conference. And always know that I hold you, your families, and your congregations in my thoughts and prayers as you carry forth your ministries in your respective mission fields.

May the peace of the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).

Paz.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ruben Saenz Jr.', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr.