



The United Church of Canada

Living Skies Regional Council

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Through change, through challenge, we'll greet the new dawn...
Spirit God, be our song.
(Bruce Harding © 1997)

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.
(John 1:5 NRSV)

Dear Friends,

Grace and peace to you, in the name of the One who calls us to celebrate God's presence – the one we proclaim as crucified and risen – Jesus Christ. It is with deep concern and care that we are writing to you, this week.

This holiest of weeks in the Christian year often provides our Communities of Faith with some of the most meaningful liturgical expressions of what it has come to mean, to be church. The Holy Week stories are rich with meaning, while the rituals and practices of these days often carry profound significance. One of the elements that is integral to creating meaning and significance, in these days, is the opportunity to pray, sing, worship and gather together. But for Holy Week 2020 and an unknown number of weeks beyond this coming Easter, this will not be possible in the usual ways.

The spread of the coronavirus and the COVID-19 pandemic, across the global human community has resulted in different levels of restrictions, imposed by different levels of governments. As we know, the federal and provincial governments of Canada are consulting regularly with health authorities, as together, they work to respond to the health, social and economic impact of this pandemic. We also know that measures to support individuals, families and communities in this time are being developed and implemented as soon as they can be. Even so, there remains great uncertainty, with new questions arising each day.

As for the role that our United Church of Canada is playing in this time, the short answer is that we are doing our best, at all levels of the church, to create, nurture and sustain relationships and support the "on the ground" ministry efforts of clergy and lay people, as they navigate new ways of being church, particularly in this time of physical distancing.

Our General Council staff are all working to interpret government and health authority decisions, and finding effective and prompt ways of sharing this information. The best way to keep up to date on news from our national church is to regularly visit the United Church website at www.united-church.ca. There, you will find information about tangible ways our United Church is responding to this health crisis through financial programs, worship resources, mission information, educational programs (e.g., webinars), and messages from our Moderator, Richard Bott. We can't urge you enough to access these resources, especially if you have ever wondered if the national church cares about you – about us. Thank goodness, it certainly does!

In our Living Skies Regional Council, our staff team has risen to the challenges presented by COVID-19. They are extremely generous in their provision of invaluable leadership through online meetings, support through emails and telephone calls, and by sharing pertinent information on the Living Skies website (www.livingskiesrc.ca) and on our Facebook page (Living Skies Region of the UCC). We are fortunate to be the recipients of their time, energy and skills.

At the local level, there is an amazing outpouring of creativity and generosity, as Communities of Faith continue to find ways of staying connected and providing meaningful spiritual content, even as we are restricted from gathering. We cannot fully express the gratitude we have for the hope and grace being expressed in these times, by the faithful people – clergy and lay people – of Living Skies. Thank you!

However, without there being any realistic sense of when the coronavirus will have run its course, we must strongly recommend that you and your Communities of Faith continue practicing physical distancing. As a tangible way of being part of the solution, as opposed to being responsible for the problem, not gathering and suspending all church activities, including worship services, is so vitally important. Yes, we appreciate there are difficulties created by isolation. Yes, we understand the grief that is building. Yes, we pray for a permanent resolution. But, everything changes – that is the nature of life and living and faith.

In addition to this, we also strongly discourage the making of hurried decisions around reducing or ending the employment of your church staff, including clergy. The work of the church is continuing in these pandemic times, and terminating staff is not necessarily the best response to the needs of our communities. Please, if you have any concerns about meeting the financial commitments to your staff, contact Shannon McCarthy (smccarthy@united-church.ca) or Tracy Murton (tmurton@united-church.ca) to discuss options, before making staff related decisions.

Friends, these are extremely strange times – unprecedented times. As God's people – followers of Jesus Christ – we have a unique opportunity to put the foundational tenets of our faith into practice. Patience is so necessary, as the days stretch into weeks, and as the information changes rapidly. Self-care is critical, because the stress of these days will lead to exhaustion. Showing respect and dignity to others acknowledges that we share this dilemma – we are not alone. Generosity is an extravagant gift that costs only small acts of kindness and compassion.

In closing, we want to say, "Thank you." Thank you for your continued efforts to be the church, in a variety of diverse and creative ways. Thank you for your energy. Thank you for the gifts of your spirit and your generous sharing of skills. Thank you for your presence and your prayers. Thank you for your strength and for being courageous. Thank you for your patience. Thank you for your faith.

We continue to hold you in our thoughts and prayers, and we look forward, with great anticipation, to the time when we will be together, again.

Blessings,

Rob Reed, Diaconal Minister,
Convenor of the Regional Gathering, and

Rev. Tricia Gerhard,
Living Skies Executive Chairperson.