

March 31, 2020

Dear ABCNJ Family,

For the past several weeks, my mind, body, and emotions have moved rapidly from numbness, disbelief, and deep sorrow to compassion, love, and hope. For as long as I can remember, this may be the first time in recent history that the people have been mandated to stay away from gathering in the church building during a crisis. Yet, I can remember, still fresh on my mind, September 11, 2001, when people flocked to the church building in search of hope and security. I can also recall other disasters and crises, such as Pearl Harbor, the 2008 Financial Crisis, Hurricanes Sandy, Katrina, and Maria, to name just a few. In all of these disasters, people sought to gather in a church building on Sunday mornings, seeking hope and security. Yet, our church doors are closed!

I am sure that this was not an easy mandate to follow. And I am certain that this mandate caused another type of crisis - the question of what's going to happen to the Church now? Perhaps in our whirlwind of emotions and uncertainty, we overlooked a simple truth - the building is not the Church. The Church is the people - the Body of Christ. When something is taken away from us, it takes us a while to see again. My dear ABCNJ family, I want to encourage you not to give up on all that gives us strength. "For God is our refuge and strength an ever present help in time of trouble"(Psalm 46:1). We have not been in this place before, but we trust the God who is involved in all circumstances. God knows how to create beauty and life out of chaos.

The Church will survive - because we are the Church! So now, as the Church gathers online, we are seeing with different eyes. We are seeing new ways to connect with our neighbors, care for one another, worship and pray together, and to be the Body of Christ. This is indeed a time to pause, to listen with new ears, and to see with fresh eyes. It is a time to be creative, innovative, and be a beloved community. I am proud of our ABCNJ churches who have not weaken but have become stronger in the midst of this pandemic. I want to encourage the Body of Christ to stay active and not give up on all that gives us strength -our spiritual practices:

Worship

Scripture reminds us that God's people worshipped together in a variety of ways and places: in the desert, within the Temple, in foreign lands, in an upper room, and along the shore. While the context changes, the invitation for a gathered group of people to participate in the worship for God remains ever-present. Our early Christian and ancient Israelite ancestors discovered at different times something we are reminded of now. Powerful worship is not about comfortability as much as it is about continuing to worship together as a community. For some, this might involve virtual worship services, specialize Facebook groups, or regular phone calls to members in the congregation. Yet, where two or more are gathered, no matter how we are gathered, Christ promises to be there.

Prayer

Prayer remains vital to how we stay connected to Christ, our Vine, and how we encourage each other and bear each other's burdens (Gal. 2:3). Waiting on the Lord does not come naturally to any of us, especially in the face of anxiety and uncertainty. So, as faith communities, we must remind each other to pray first and stay grounded in our prayer life. This may be an opportunity to create a new and more healthy prayer rhythm. Many of us are not comfortable connecting to God in a home of either unexpected quiet or, especially those with kids or in the health professions, unexpected chaos. So, live in grace and not the law.

Make space, even a small space, for that connection to God in prayer. Empty your glass daily. Rinse it out. Get a fresh drink of Christ's living water; then, you will have something life-giving to pass on. Pray for your neighbors. If you can walk around your community, take time to pray for your neighbors. We are extensions of God's love through service and blessing. Our prayers prayed in our local community are part of our incarnational presence to the concerns and needs of others. Take this opportunity to pray, dwell, and rest in God's presence.

Hands and Feet of Christ

This crisis provides an opportunity for the Body of Christ to have increased engagement in and impact upon their neighborhoods. When we shop for groceries, be mindful to connect with a senior citizen, a single parent, or a person with a compromised immune system to get their list and leave their items at their door. Such acts of kindness demonstrate God's love. Where there is someone in need, Christ calls us to show love indeed. The Greatest Commandment (Matt. 22:37-40), the parable of The Sheep and The Goats (Matt. 25:31-46), and The Great Commission (Matt. 28:19 & 20) intersect to illustrate Jesus' expectation that His followers show the love of God toward others and spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all people. The Church's history of resilience demonstrates that although God does not cause everything, God can use everything to draw people to Christ. Biblical patriarchs and matriarchs endured enslavement, famine, war, disease, deportation, and immigration. Through it all, their faith bore witness to God's faithfulness. Now is our time to be God's hands and feet by lovingly meeting the spiritual, emotional, and physical needs of those in our neighborhoods.

Generosity

Generosity begets generosity in any situation. Continue in your practice of presenting your tithes and offerings. Continue to support and strengthen the ministries in your church and community. Give online or write a check. I encourage you to look through the stewardship resources provided with this mailing. We might find ourselves mandated to practice social distancing, physical distancing, or to be sheltered in place. We must not distance ourselves, however, from all that gives us strength - worship, prayer, loving, and giving. Our spiritual practices must not be sheltered. God is not sheltered, but God is our Shelter! "You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress my God, in whom I trust'" (Psalms 91:1-2).

Walking by Faith Together,
Rev. Miriam Mendez
Executive Minister, ABCNJ