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Friends,

The Presbytery of New York City and its congregations embody God's love, proclaim God's word, and promote God's justice as we seek the welfare of the city. During the age of COVID-19, out of concern for the most vulnerable in our congregation and in our community, we have practiced sacred distancing: we have closed our church buildings and we have continued to be the Church.

On May 22, President Trump declared churches and other houses of worship to be "essential" and called upon governors to reopen the buildings of churches and houses of worship by this weekend. He threatened to "override" governors who fail to do so. The legal authority he might use to do this is not evident. The Presbytery's Coronavirus Emergency Response Team has done significant research on the pandemic and does not believe there is scientific evidence that says it is safe to gather in person as congregations at this time.

We commend the counsel of the Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church to the congregations of the Presbytery of New York City: "We are not for rushing people back into the pews when this virus is still claiming victims. When people can go to church without fear of infection, we will be ready."

The Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson reminds us that "the Church is, and has always been, more than a building. Congregations are using new and creative ways to share the gospel and minister to those in need." Our congregations have demonstrated that again and again. With buildings temporarily closed, we have prayed, worshiped, made music (which is a bit of a challenge on Zoom), advocated for justice, worked for the welfare of the city, and witnessed to our faith in Jesus Christ by building on existing ministries and by developing new ministries.

The Coronavirus Emergency Response Team will present a resource on long term planning—including eventual re-opening of church buildings—to the General Cabinet on Tuesday. It should be available for distribution shortly after that meeting. It will contain considerations and readings for how to re-open in a way that mitigates the risk of infection. We have a responsibility to care for one another and look out for those most at risk of getting sick or losing their lives from this virus. We believe that means we should not re-open our church buildings until people can gather free from the fear of infection. We will be ready when that time comes. Until it does, we will keep our sacred distance from one another, and we will know: We are the Church. We have been the Church. We will be the Church.

Coronavirus Emergency Response Team, Presbytery of New York City

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