



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Thomas J. Bickerton, Resident Bishop | New York Area Episcopal Office

Robert M. Walker, Assistant to the Bishop | Pamela Bowe-Tabbs, Administrative Assistant to the Bishop

20 Soundview Ave., White Plains, NY 10606 | 914-615-2221 | bishop@nyac.com

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A Letter to the Church from Bishop Thomas J. Bickerton

*O Come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.*

This is the first verse of a song sung throughout the four Sundays of Advent. It is a song that encompasses the whole feeling of people of faith. It talks about the good *and* the bad, the lament *and* the expectation. As Paul said to the church in Corinth, *"We are, . . . as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich, as having nothing, and yet possessing everything."* (II Corinthians 10:10)

2020 is one of those years when the simple words of this song really strike home with us. Don't you feel like you are in a *"lonely exile"* as we endure yet another wave of the Covid-19 virus? Aren't you longing for the Son of God to appear and deliver us from this ever-unfolding endurance test? I know I am.

*O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer
our spirits by thy justice here,
disperse the gloomy clouds of night
and death's dark shadows put to flight.*

Each year at Advent and Christmas, we gather in sanctuaries far and wide for worship services, activities, and fellowship meals that are all designed to *"cheer our spirits"* and *"disperse the gloomy clouds of night."* We make advent wreaths and light candles, we provide hope and spread joy and, for a few brief weeks, we remind ourselves of how intentional acts of charity and love can actually transform a life and bring justice to a misguided world.

But in 2020, don't you feel the gloomy clouds of night knocking on your door? With every report of spikes in infection rates, rises in hospitalizations, and increases in deaths across the world, don't you find yourself crying out for God to make *"death's dark shadows put to flight?"* I know that I do.

*O come, Desire of nations bind
all people in one heart and mind.
from dust thou brought us forth to life;
deliver us from earthly strife.*

During the Sundays of Advent, we sing this song in anticipation that somehow God will unite us in purpose and mission. We sing these words remembering that because of God's amazing creative powers, we were given life from nothing and that because of God's amazing grace we are delivered from the things that cause us grief and strife.

And yet, in 2020 we remain so very divided across our country and world. For every person who wears a mask, washes their hands, and stays socially distanced, there is another person who is defiant when it comes to safety precautions, denying that there is a threat that needs addressing, and convinced that they are somehow immune to the virus' deadly touch. Doesn't this stark division of opinion and practice not only bring frustration but fear to your heart, especially as we try to lead? It does for me.

Friends and Colleagues, this is a very unique time for us and a very challenging time for our church. Months ago we had hoped that by the time Advent/Christmas came along we could reassemble in our sanctuaries, sing carols, light candles, renew our fellowship, and bring hope in what has been, at times, a hopeless feeling of disbelief.

Yet, it is still not that time.

I write to you today with the sober acknowledgement that the word you have expected from me is not a word that I can, in good conscience, offer to you. Instead, I am writing to implore you to exercise increased caution and care during a season that will tempt us to break the rules and throw caution to the wind-- all for the sake of a time-honored tradition or a deep longing within to get back to the way it was before.

Because of the specific approach to dealing with this virus and the great disparity of infection rates in "micro-clusters" in New York and "Phase 2.1" in Connecticut, there is no "one size fits all" answer for how we deal with guidelines for our churches this Advent & Christmas season.

However, here are some important factors to consider:

1. Over the last two months, over 20 churches in the New York Annual Conference have re-opened only to close again due to an outbreak of Covid-19 within the church.
2. Guidelines for singing in public venues have not changed at all. There is to be no singing indoors. Any solo/special music performed must be at a distance of 12 feet. Any outdoor singing must be done with masks and with appropriate social distancing observed.
3. Indoor venues should only be done after appropriate filtration systems have been installed in heating units. No ceiling fans or circulated air should be utilized unless there is an appropriate amount of outside air circulated.
4. Evidence of the ill-effects of "super spreader" events are growing all around us. Poor disciplines and decision-making have revealed sobering consequences.
5. Remember the basics: wear a mask, socially distance, and wash your hands frequently.

In addition, the following principles should be observed:

1. Each one of our churches should place the safety of all persons as the highest priority, especially those who are in vulnerable health categories.
2. Being desperate to be in-person or to gather for financial reasons should not be a consideration.
3. Safety should ultimately be seen as an act of love.
4. Joy can be found internally by taking intentional external steps to ensure that our people are not put in situations that might bring them harm.
5. Our best public witness and our most effective evangelistic outreach is found by the way that we care for one another.
6. Be smart in every decision you make, knowing that the lives of the people we serve will be influenced and affected by those decisions.

Without mandating any closure of our churches, I would strongly urge each of our 421 churches in the New York Annual Conference to not conduct in-person worship or activities through the end of year 2020. Given the focus on infection rates in specific areas, each church will need to make their own decisions. However, my best advice is for you to plan for a virtual Advent/Christmas, not an in-person one.

A [new resource page for Advent/Christmas has just been posted on our website](#). I encourage each of you to review the innovative ideas and to use them as a platform for your own creativity. We're also encouraging sharing of ideas, so please email yours to shareyourstory@nyac.com to encourage and support others in our Conference.

In addition, some of the grim realities in this season are the long lines of persons waiting in food lines. One food bank recently reported that 40% of the persons waiting for food had never been to a feeding ministry before.

As a result, I am initiating a special **Bishop's Advent Offering for Feeding Ministries** across the New York Annual Conference. Thanks to the hard work of Tom Vencuss, the inventory of our food banks and feeding ministries is up to date. The need is great and your offerings, initiated among your people, will go directly to those immediate needs throughout our Annual Conference. I urge you to be generous and sacrificial as the needs are undeniable at this time. *Please send your coordinated contributions to NYAC with the notation ATTN: Fran Collins, Food Relief Ministry.*

At the end of each verse of "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," there is a common refrain:

*Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee,
O Israel.*

This is the "last word" of a song that acknowledges the desperation of captivity, the sadness of darkness and gloom, and the need for unity of heart and mind. It is this very same "last word" that will see us through these ongoing days of anxiety and uncertainty. The God that gave us life will be the same God who will deliver us from earthly strife! Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel, "God with us," will come to us! May it be so!

So, light a candle, read your favorite hymns, pray a prayer of petition and thanksgiving, and remind yourself that God will indeed come to us once again this Advent and Christmas season!

The Journey Continues, . . .



Thomas J. Bickerton
Resident Bishop