

From Susan Faye Wonderland,  
Transitional Executive

3/20/20 An Open Letter to the Synod of the Trinity:

Friends and colleagues, I have been trying to write for the past two days, and every time I do our situation changes! You know that; you are living this same season with me.

I write after hearing the most recent set of guidelines and expectations from Governor Wolf (3/20) that shut down non-essential businesses and buildings. And I see that religious organizations may continue physical operations, while limiting gathering size and using social distancing – for now. I hope that means, that while we may be exploring the livestreaming of worship by pastor and musician from the sanctuary, and connecting others in creative ways from their homes – I trust that means, we are no longer gathering people for worship or church-related meetings, even with 10 or less in the same space. Regardless of what we MAY do, right now, in this time – and in our places – our call to model and join with our communities in authentic ways is loud to me. That is now about keeping people safe, finding ways to care for those who are vulnerable, and so much more. It is about those of us who live where there are multiple cases of virus, and those of us living where there are none.

In the Synod offices, we are tightening up on our building use again, and formally limiting any use, even by the individuals serving in our building, to that which is absolutely necessary.

Yet neither the Presbytery of Carlisle and its ministries, nor the Synod of the Trinity, are ceasing to serve out our mission. Let me explain...

I was not quite a teenager when Dick Avery and Don Marsh came to do a concert at my home church in Hartsville, PA. I remember watching — from the balcony, I think — and it was fun, and we sang along, and the tunes stuck. Years later, Ken and I would be honored to be their neighbors in ministry, and it was special to get to cover for Dick several times and preach from “his” pulpit.

While the duo wrote wonderful music for many years, some of their earliest tunes took root in our PCUSA music culture, and several are simply embedded in this old brain and psyche.

One of the earliest children’s songs I remember learning was “I am the Church! You are the Church!” It came complete with hand motions that my fingers never seemed to want to do. But today, this week, it’s the words I am remembering, particularly the chorus and the first verse. Sing it if you remember but read it if it’s new:

Refrain: I am the church! You are the church!  
We are the church together!  
All who follow Jesus,  
all around the world!  
Yes, we’re the church together!

The church is not a building.  
the church is not a steeple.  
the church is not a resting place.  
the church is a people. (refrain)

How long have we been talking in our denomination about church buildings?  
Be honest.

We've been talking about their age, about their needs, about their kinda-maybe, but-not-quite ability to accommodate ministry today?

Come on, you've heard it – the word albatross has sometimes been used!

That's one reality.

Yet there is another: many have repurposed old spaces and are doing vital community work and ministry for which the building is the precious gift of space. Our buildings host much that is Christ's work; and they have held some of the laughter and cries and work of God's people for many years.

AND YET as the song says, the church itself is the people worshipping in and using the space. The congregation is – the people – wherever and whenever they are.

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We have been asked to take a leap of faith this week.

We have been asked to be brave, faithful and risk-taking.

We have been asked to model for the common good a way of really living  
what we've sung in that old song.

We have been asked to step out of our buildings and be the church differently in and for the community in ways that many have been rushing to imagine this week, even ways that we cannot yet see.

And years of missional turnaround work have been encouraging much the same thing.  
(Whether we've gotten there yet is another conversation!)

So, what's the rub now?

Ah, I know: We have been asked to leave the building on a timeline that is not of our own choosing, without a plan in place and without a vote and a committee!

And yes, certain parts of me (reflecting a heritage that runs deep in this region!) are almost tempted to resist or bend what is being asked of us!

But this is not about me or my sensibilities. That comes later.

This is about WE, all of God's own, together in and beyond this church-without-walls.

And it is about Now.

And yes, it is scary, and we wish we had more time to plan and pack before we go.

But friends, whatever our state authorities may ask or require of us, God is asking even more.

Asking more, because, I believe, how we go forward IS about us all.

Make no mistake, God is asking us to live what we have long said we know:

I am the church. You are the church. We are the church together...

The church is not a building.

the church is not a steeple.

the church is not a resting place.

the church is... a people.

For such a time as this. We are the church.

Blessings.

Sue