

To the people of our beloved communities in the Chapel Hill area: your clergy greet you in the name of God. We write to tell you a story of solidarity and friendship, and to share with you our unanimous decision not to regather our worshipping communities at this time.

In the early days of the pandemic, a diverse group of local faith leaders began to meet for mutual support, to share ideas, and to coordinate across our many institutions. We lead churches and synagogues of all sizes and denominations. Since the beginning, all of our conversations have been aided by expert medical and infectious disease advice. Very quickly we discovered our common ground: our houses of worship needed to suspend all in-person gatherings until the crisis had passed. We wanted to act together—not only to protect our members—but also our neighbors, friends, and families. We did not act out of fear; we acted out of the love nurtured by our faith in God.

Those first weeks are long past and now we know there is no clear or tidy end in sight for the pandemic. Yet, all of our communities have discovered new ways of keeping in touch, gathering in virtual assemblies and minyanim, and loving God and our neighbors. Each of us can clearly say, by God's grace, that while our houses of worship may not meet, our communities thrive and flourish. We are, by every definition of the word, essential.

Many of us are weary of social distancing requirements. We all long to gather, to sing a new song and share our sacred stories. We miss our rites and traditions. As your pastors, ministers, priests, and rabbis, please know that we ache for the day we can return to in-person worship, fellowship, and community. But that time is not now. The love that caused us to suspend our gatherings—even before we had to—is the same love which calls us to keep the doors of our sanctuaries closed, despite any permission or encouragement we might have from elected officials. The medical advice we have received is clear: it is not yet safe for us to meet. We also know this in our hearts.

The virus has killed over 100,000 Americans and wreaked havoc in almost every area of our lives. Many of you have lost your jobs. Life in COVID-19 feels like a succession of losses. We pledge our help, our prayers, our service, and the strength and goodwill of our faith communities as we mourn, heal, and restore. Our interfaith clergy group will continue to meet for support, to stay on top of the latest medical advice, and make plans together.

When the time is right, we will gather again in our holy places. We will celebrate again. We will lift up our hearts in prayer and song again. But that time is not now. We wish you every blessing and God's peace.

Yours in faith,

Cameron Barr, *United Church of Chapel Hill*
Rodney Coleman, *First Baptist Church*
Jen Feldman, *Kebillah Synagogue*
DaMarcus Johnson, *Life Church*
Jay Kennett, *Hillsboro United Church of Christ*
Curt Lowndes, *The Gathering Church*
Jarrett & Meg McLaughlin, *University Presbyterian*
Will Rose, *Holy Trinity Lutheran*
Ben Williams, *Christ United Methodist Church*

Justin Coleman, *University United Methodist Church*
Michael Cousin, *St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal*
Clarke French, *Church of the Holy Family (Episcopal)*
Barry Jones, *University Baptist Church*
Matt LeRoy, *Love Chapel Hill*
Marcus McFaul, *Binkley Baptist Church*
Elizabeth Marie Melchionna, *Chapel of the Cross*
Adam Seate, *Orange United Methodist Church*