

# THE PRESBYTERY OF DETROIT

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Dear brothers and sisters, members of the beloved community, and to our political leaders at the local, state, and national levels:

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We write as leaders of the Presbytery of Detroit, a regional governing body of the Presbyterian Church (USA), in our individual capacities. We write from a place of deep pain and anger as we witness the division and inequality laid bare by this virus, particularly in our region. The facts are well-known yet still not addressed: Michigan is one of “the most severely impacted states” in this pandemic, and the city of Detroit and whole metro area have been hit particularly hard. The *Detroit Free Press* reported Dr. Deborah Birx’s calling out our region: “We are concerned about certain counties that look like they are having a more rapid increase” in COVID-19 cases, specifically citing Wayne County—where the city of Detroit is located.<sup>1</sup> Several risk factors make Detroit especially vulnerable to a disproportionate impact:

The high number of COVID-19 cases in Detroit and Wayne County tell a story of a community with a disproportionately poor population, with high rates of asthma, diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure—the very conditions that make it more likely for COVID-19 to cause serious symptoms, the very conditions that can end in death when this new coronavirus comes knocking.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, “African-Americans, who account for a third of positive tests in Michigan, represent 40 percent of deaths in that state even though they make up 14 percent of the population.”<sup>3</sup> We confess that white America gets a cold, Black America gets pneumonia.<sup>4</sup> COVID-19 is exposing what was already present in the city of Detroit and many of its suburbs:

- a lack of good health care and insurance resulting in a myriad of health issues including heart disease,
- a lack of proper living wages resulting in poverty and poor access to healthy food leading to higher rates of obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure,
- poor environmental living conditions resulting in a higher percentage of asthma,
- a lack of access to personal care items (laundry detergent, dish soap, bleach, etc.) to decrease the spread of viruses,

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<sup>1</sup> Kristen Jordan Shamus et. al., “*High Virus Rates in Wayne County, Detroit Alarm US Officials*,” DETROIT FREE PRESS, March 26, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> John Eligon et. al., “*Black Americans Face Alarming Rates of Coronavirus Infection in Some States*,” THE NEW YORK TIMES, April 14, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Gail Strange, “*When America gets a cold, the African American community gets pneumonia*,” PRESBYTERIAN NEWS SERVICE, April 16, 2020.

- a lack of safe transportation which requires individuals to ride and work unprotected in buses, and high car insurance rates preventing car ownership,
- close living conditions that do not allow for safe social distancing practices,
- a lack of access to quality educational opportunities and resources, and
- the vulnerability of populations living in mass incarceration to disease, particularly African American men.

We are also aware of deplorable acts of hate and racism directed toward minorities and the socially and economically disadvantaged.

As a church guided by God’s Word in Scripture, we cannot help but recall these immortal words:

I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.<sup>5</sup>

In this time of Covid-19, while we are implored not to gather in festivals and solemn assemblies, we are called to act. We’ve encouraged our member churches to suspend in-person worship and every church has made its own decision to do so. We believe when the children of God are hurting and dying, and the plague of systemic racism becomes a pandemic, God wants justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. We believe that “In a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us courage to hear the voices of people long silenced and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.”<sup>6</sup>

We therefore write:

- in support of Executive Orders 2020-21, 2020-42, 2020-59, and related Orders calling Michiganders to Stay Home and Stay Safe,
- in support of the Michigan Coronavirus Task Force on Racial Disparities,
- in support of those on the frontlines and essential workers,
- in support of actions that show that we value all human life regardless of race, creed or economic status, and
- in support of the millions who have lost work in our region, who are struggling to apply for unemployment and pay their bills, having to choose between exposing themselves to a deadly virus or feeding their families.

We call on:

- government leaders to make testing and healthcare accessible to all, to provide adequate protective equipment to essential workers, and to address the glaring inequalities in our region exposed by this virus,
- faith leaders, including those of the some seventy-five churches in our Presbytery, to embark upon concrete actions that show the value we place on all human life regardless of race, creed, or economic status,

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<sup>5</sup> Amos 5:21, 23-24, NRSV.

<sup>6</sup> The Book of Confessions, “A Brief Statement of Faith,” PC(USA).

- churches to act in a way that is in the world but not of the world,<sup>7</sup> not competing against one another to “open up first,” but rather to work across religious, denominational and theological lines to keep our communities safe,
- majority-race churches to stand beside their minority-race brothers and sisters, particularly in the African American, Latino, and Asian communities,
- all who follow God’s call in this Kairos moment to serve one another, even to the point of self-sacrifice.

We do believe that *God is good, all the time; and all the time, God is good*, and that is true even and especially now. We believe that now, perhaps more than any moment in recent history, as Presbyterian minister Fred Rogers used to say, God is at work “among the helpers,” and we are truly thankful.<sup>8</sup> We are lifting up each of you leaders in our prayers for compassion, discernment, and action.

In Christ,

Rev. Dr. Robert Agnew, Co-Acting Head of Staff, Presbytery of Detroit  
 CRE Charon Barconey, Associate Executive Presbyter, Presbytery of Detroit  
 Elder David Bunch, Vice Moderator, Presbytery of Detroit  
 Rev. Julie Delezenne, Moderator, Presbytery of Detroit  
 Rev. Marianne Grano, Esq., Stated Clerk, Presbytery of Detroit  
 Elder Stefanie Lewis, Chair, Coordinating Cabinet, Presbytery of Detroit  
 Rev. Neeta Nichols, Co-Acting Head of Staff, Presbytery of Detroit

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<sup>7</sup> see John 15:19.

<sup>8</sup> Joshua Bote, “*Mister Rogers said to 'look for the helpers.'*” USA TODAY, March 26, 2020.