

August 1, 2020

To the Churches, Clergy, and Friends of the New Hampshire Conference of the United Church of Christ:

As was expected, we are seeing diverging realities affecting the decisions of our congregations. We have had a dozen or so of our congregations resume in-person worship (with modifications) in their sanctuaries. We have 15 to 20 others engaged in some type of modified outdoor worship experience. At the same time, we have also had a handful of congregations already discern that they will not plan to resume in-person worship until such time as a vaccine is readily available. Richard and I have consulted with many of our congregations during their discernment. I will say I have been heartened by the faithfulness and seriousness with which church leaders are finding a way forward during these uncertain times.

There are sections of our state that have not seen active coronavirus cases for many weeks and yet others that are still seeing new cases announced nearly daily. Some congregation's worship spaces provide more room for physical distancing than others and some congregation's worship space is better ventilated than others. There are also congregation's that find themselves preferring the virtual worship experience over the modified experience they would have if they returned to their worship space. All of this affects the discernment of our congregations.

We have reached the point where in some matters the Conference cannot provide counsel that is universally applicable to all of our churches. On other matters, we will continue to do so. Meanwhile, Richard and I are available to consult with church leaders about the uniqueness of your church's situation as it is helpful.

Please understand that should cases of Covid-19 increase in New Hampshire in a sustained way, we are prepared to immediately adjust our recommendations.

CHURCHES & CLERGY

- 1. Given the diverging realities faced by our congregations, at this time I am leaving it to the discernment of local congregations to determine if and when a return to a modified version of in-person worship may be appropriate.** Please utilize our "[Things to Be Considered for Returning to In-person Worship](#)" as well as state provided resources for determining appropriate modifications. Right now, we are recommending such modifications be maintained indefinitely. New Hampshire health officials are warning us that our number of virus infections may worsen, perhaps significantly, in the fall. It is critical that our congregations remain prepared to suspend in-person worship again if health circumstances seem to warrant it.

2. **We are recommending that in-person religious education activities, particularly for children and youth, not be resumed at this time.** As our schools (and other child care facilities) prepare to re-open for in-person education in the fall, the one thing we know for sure is that we don't fully understand what the health impact on our communities will be. Until we better understand, it is not an appropriate time to add another risk factor to our congregations by resuming in-person religious education.
3. **I would continue to encourage churches involved in search and call to continue to modify their work as necessary.** It may be soon possible for properly socially distanced in-person interviews to take place as long as the candidate is able to drive to the interview. We would still discourage asking any candidate to take public transportation (i.e. air travel) to an interview. We do believe it is important that all candidates be treated with consistency.
4. **The Conference will be continuing with regular installments of our Clergy Check-ins.** Please watch your *Weekly News* for upcoming opportunities.
5. **The Horton Center community is offering a full worship service for use by our congregations.** August 9th will be our Horton Center Summer Sunday. A YouTube based worship service will be led by our directors, deans and campers. A Zoom "coffee hour" will be offered at 11:30 am that morning. While we will be releasing the service on August 9th, it would be appropriate for other Sundays later in the summer if that works better for your congregation. If you are interested in receiving the link for the Horton Center Summer Sunday Worship and Coffee Hour please contact Interim Executive Director Tim Hughes at thughes@nhcucc.org.
6. **The Conference Office continues to add resources to our Staying Safe in the Midst of Contagious Disease web page. For a limited time these resources include opportunities for low-interest loans as well as some grant opportunities.** These resources are available at <http://nhcucc.org/caring-for-congregations/staying-safe-in-the-midst-of-contagious-disease>)
7. **Pursuant to the New Hampshire Attorney General's Office which has made the recommendation to all non-profits that they add provisions for electronic voting to their By-laws, we currently have some potential language under review by legal counsel.** We will seek to make this available to churches as soon as possible.

CONFERENCE

- 1. The Conference Office will remain closed for all meetings, gatherings and visits indefinitely.** Right now, we anticipate the Conference Office will remain closed to the public at least through Labor Day.
- 2. Our staff will not be making in-person visits to churches for, at least, the remainder of 2020.** For the safety of both our staff and the communities we serve, we are not scheduling any in-person church visits at this time. We will continue to serve you by digital means as best we are able (including participation in virtual worship services).

Blessings,
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