Last week, via the New Hew Hampshire Council of Churches, we received an update from State Epidemiologist, Dr. Benjamin Chan. Covid-19 trends in New Hampshire are starting to cause concern. In August, we were experiencing 15-20 new infections a day. Now we are experiencing 70-80 new infections a day. Much of this increase is focused in the southeastern part of the state (Hillsborough, Merrimack, and Rockingham Counties).

In the past three months, there have been five Covid clusters at Places of Worship. The bigger concern is that each of those clusters have produced an average of 20 cases. Dr. Chan's recommendations for Places of Worship continue to be to follow the Governor's Guidance for Places of Worship (https://nhchurches.org/flexguidance/), wear masks, and be extra attentive to cleaning and reducing touching of commonly touched items (pews or chairs, offering plates, hymnals, microphones, etc.). To track what is happening in different parts of the state, Dr. Chan recommends this online, interactive dashboard: https://www.nh.gov/covid19/dashboard/overview.htm.

At this time, I am not adjusting the Conference recommendation as written on August 1st (http://nhcucc.org/uploads/documents/weekly-news-documents/Covid%2019%20Conference%20Note%206-1.pdf). However, I am keeping a close eye on things. The key piece of data I focus on is the Covid Positivity Rate which in Hillsborough, Merrimack, Rockingham and Strafford Counties is between 1.4 - 1.9%. If the Covid Positivity Rate crosses 3% for any sustained period of time, I will be recommending that churches in those counties discontinue in-person worship until the Positivity Rate drops back below 3% for a sustained period of time.

I would, however, recommend to all our churches that are holding indoor, in-person worship that plans be put in place to be able to quickly pivot to a virtual format if the health situation in their region of the State should necessitate it.

Rev. Gordon Rankin
Conference Minister
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United Church of Christ