

November 15, 2020

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

I suspect that we are all aware that our Covid-19 trends are cause for concern. Not only is New Hampshire's 7-day average of daily new cases the highest it has ever been, but it is over twice as high (208 vs. 102) as the worst time in the spring.

I have said before one of the keys pieces of data I use in assessing the Conference's recommendation to our local church is positivity rate. I am looking for the positivity rate to stay below 3%. As of this weekend, our statewide Covid positivity rate is at 3.7 percent. The website I use for my county by county assessments is currently down, however earlier in the week Rockingham, Coos, Sullivan, and Strafford (at 5.4%) were all exceeding the 3% threshold with other counties edging quite close.

Congregate activities remain the most significant risk factor for Covid transmission. Modification to worship and other activities can help reduce risk but they cannot overcome a continually increasing number of Covid-19 case in the state.

With all this in mind, the New Hampshire Conference is making the following recommendations:

#### **CHURCHES & CLERGY**

- 1. I would encourage the leadership of all our New Hampshire Conference churches to consider discontinuing in-person (indoor) public worship and all other indoor public gatherings at least through the end of the 2020.** Please know that I recognize the type of emotional and spiritual impact that not being able to be together in the ways we desire will create during the Advent and Christmas season. Not only have I heard others speak to this, but I very much grieve the loss of some traditions in my own soul. As you have at other times this year, please continue to apply your spiritual imaginations to creating new ways and traditions that your community can use to celebrate the meaning of this season. (I should mention that I suspect this recommendation may continue past the end of the year, but we will assess again a month from now and provide such recommendations.)
- 2. We are continuing to recommend that in-person religious education activities, particularly for children and youth, not be resumed at this time.**
- 3. I would encourage churches that are engaged with in-person interviews in the search and call process to resume conducting such interviews solely by video or phone conferencing means or to postpone them.** At the very least, I would

ask that candidates not be asked to travel from out of state even for socially distanced in-person interviews. The risk is too great for both the candidate and search committee interviewing the candidate

4. **The Conference will be continuing with monthly installments of our Clergy Check-ins.** All of our December Check-ins will include a time to celebrate the Sacrament of Communion together.
5. **The Council of Conference Minister has just released a full worship service for use by our churches and the New Hampshire Conference Ministerial Staff is working towards preparing a service that can be used by our churches on Sunday, December 27<sup>th</sup>.**
6. **The Conference Office continues to add resources to our Staying Safe in the Midst of Contagious Disease web page.** These resources are available at <http://nhcucc.org/caring-for-congregations/staying-safe-in-the-midst-of-contagious-disease>.

## CONFERENCE

1. **The Conference Office will remain closed for all meetings, gatherings and visits indefinitely.**
2. **Our staff will not be making in-person visits to churches through at least the first quarter of 2021.** 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).

**Finally, I would remind all of us that this is most definitely a time to both offer and receive grace.** Making Christmas feel like Christmas is not your pastor's responsibility. Nor is it the responsibility of your church musician. It is not even the responsibility of the Deacons or any other group in the church. The real truth is that this Advent and Christmas season will likely feel different than any that has come before. It is an unrealistic expectation to think that it could be the same. That does not mean that we can't find new meaning and new celebration in this season. It seems to me that the story of the Divine breaking through into our troubled world and incarnating new hope and embodied love is one that will preach right now. We just need to have the grace to

welcome this story told in new way and be relentless in sharing this story with one another.

Blessings,  
Gordon