

March 10, 2021

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

I admit it. I am a Holy Week snob. One of my liturgical pet peeves is jumping from the Triumphant Entry of Palm Sunday to the resurrection joy of Easter without all that comes in between. The stories of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday are what shape our understanding of the promise of resurrection. Yet, even though I may be snobbish about it, I do recognize that there is a human impulse to want to get to Easter hope as quickly as possible.

There is good news. After a year living under the weight of the Covid-19 pandemic, we are seeing signs of hope. 9% of the population of New Hampshire are now fully vaccinated and nearly 20% have received one dose of the vaccine. Our positivity numbers have been decreasing, as have our new cases. Hope is on the horizon. But it is important for us to remember that we haven't made it to that horizon yet.

Statewide our positivity rate is at 3.7%*. That is still above the 3.0% threshold we are using for recommending individual church discernment regarding resuming modified in-person, indoor worship. Grafton, Sullivan, and Cheshire counties are below the 3.0% threshold which, by the law of averages, means all the other counties are still a good bit higher. In many areas of the state, there is still a way to go.

Yesterday, the Center for Disease Control released new guidelines for those who are fully vaccinated. It is important to highlight that their recommendations include the statement that even when fully vaccinated, we are not yet ready to be gathering in medium or large size groups. This would be descriptive of most of our congregations. While the vaccines may keep the individuals gathered safe, such gatherings still risk increasing community spread. For those committed to loving our neighbors, we don't want to be risking the health and welfare of our neighbors, even if it is safe for some of us to be together.

Friends, hope is on the horizon, but we have a few more days to make our way through before we arrive there.

With these mixed trends in mind, the New Hampshire Conference is making the following recommendations:

CHURCHES & CLERGY

- 1. I would encourage the leadership of all of our New Hampshire Conference churches to continue discontinuing in-person (indoor) public worship and all other indoor public gatherings, through the end of April. As the weather**

warms there may be opportunities for churches to discern safe ways to hold modified, outdoor worship opportunities.

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 conduct 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 the search committee interviewing the candidate
4. **To continue to provide opportunities for pastoral and church staff respite, the National Setting of the UCC and the Council of Conference Ministers will be working together to prepare a service for the Sunday after Easter (April 11th).** We anticipate being able to make this service available to our congregations on March 22nd.
5. **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>)
6. **Our pandemic experience has changed us and our churches. The ways in which we do ministry are now different and perhaps not all of them will, or should, return to the way they were before the pandemic. I would encourage all our congregations to engage in some intentional reflections on the following questions:**
 - a. What activities did you start during the pandemic that you cannot wait to let go of?
 - b. What activities did you start that you definitely want to keep?
 - c. What did you let go of during the pandemic that you cannot wait to get back to?
 - d. What did you let go of during the pandemic that you won't pick up again?

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 indefinitely.** For the safety of both our staff and the communities we serve, we are not scheduling any in-person church visits. Our current thinking is this will last at least through the summer. We will continue to serve you by digital means, as best we are able (including participation in virtual worship services).

Blessings,
Gordon

*The two resources I generally use for keeping track of Covid-19 trends are: *Tracking our Covid Response* (<https://www.covidexitstrategy.org/>) which was recommended by the UCC Insurance Board and *the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services Covid-19 Dashboard* (<https://www.nh.gov/covid19/dashboard/overview.htm>).