

January 28, 2021

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

The Covid news for our state is very mixed right now.

I feel I must begin by acknowledging that this week we marked that over 1,000 of our neighbors have lost their lives to this terrible virus. I would hope everyone of our churches will pause to acknowledge the individual and collective grief that presses upon us.

Some of our Covid numbers are trending better* (although there are differences in different parts of our state). As far as new cases, our numbers (based on a 7 day average) are lower than they have been since December 1st. Yet, they are still higher than every day before that. The 7-day statewide positivity is around 5.5 %. That said, we still have six counties that are ranging between 6.5 and 8 %. (You will recall that having a positivity rate of less than 3% is one of the key factors we look at with regards to our recommendations.)

We celebrate that some among us have been receiving the vaccine. Nonetheless, we recognize that there is a long, long way to go.

We have learned of new strains of the virus. Some of these are more contagious, some of these are more impactful, and, in the last couple of days, we've learned some may not be covered by our current vaccines. I have not yet heard anything about these new strains showing up in New Hampshire. However, wisdom would say we ought to be prepared for that eventuality.

There are reasons for hope and reasons for an abundance of caution.

I have received the questions about what percentage of congregants need to be vaccinated before in-person worship can safely resume. This is a very complex question. The New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services held workshops a couple of weeks ago. The target figure they used for resuming public activities was 70%. I would remind you this was not 70% of those at the public activity, but 70% of the community. Even if a strong majority of your church has already received the vaccine, there is still risk of transmission. Church folks who are themselves protected from the virus can still transmit the virus at home or work or in social situations to those who have yet to be vaccinated. I would urge care in not assuming that because we are safe, it means everyone is safe.

My answer to the complicated question of the percentage of a congregation that should be vaccinated before in-person worship can safely resume is equally complicated: when

70% of the community has been vaccinated and when the 7-day positivity percentage is below 3% and if there are no significant new risks from any of the new strains of virus. Obviously, each of these has an impact on the other, but I would want to see all three.

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 consider discontinuing in-person (indoor) public worship and all other indoor public gatherings, at least through the fifth Sunday of Lent (March 21).** As always, this recommendation may be extended as needed. If our recommendations will seem to impact Holy Week, we will try to circulate them early in the month of March.
- 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).** When completed this service will be made available to our churches for your use.
- 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>)

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>).