

April 21, 2021

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

One of my favorite pieces of church history to teach is about why we as Christians worship on Sunday. The answer (as probably many of you know) is that Christians worship on the first day of the week, because the Resurrection took place on the first day of the week. Every Sunday when we worship, we celebrate Easter. (This is also the reason Sundays are not counted in the forty days of Lent as they are not to be considered fasting days but always celebrations of Easter.)

After many long days of pandemic-caused fasting, I am hopeful that we will have celebrations of Easter over and over again in the months to come. Not all the signs of new life will come at once, but they will come. And if we remember how our tradition ritualizes the continued celebration of Easter, perhaps it will help us be patient as our God continuously unfolds new glimpses of resurrection before us over the months to come.

There is good news to be found in our pandemic number. Nearly 25% of the population of the State of New Hampshire is now fully vaccinated. That is amazing progress. Also, after a month of rising numbers of Covid cases and Covid positivity rate (*), the past week has shown a decrease in both numbers. Most of the State is not yet where we need to be to resume in-person congregational gatherings, but we are heading in the right direction.

With a hope for continued improvement, the New Hampshire Conference is making the following recommendations:

CHURCHES & CLERGY

- 1. I would encourage the leadership of our New Hampshire Conference churches to continue discontinuing in-person (indoor) public worship and all other indoor public gatherings, through the end of May.** We are in a season when we believe modified outdoor worship opportunities could be safely held.
- 2. Our Governor has announced that he will remove mandates for "Places of Worship" as of May 8th.** However, he has also announced that he will be providing a list of recommendations for faith communities. **Please, let's not confuse the removal of mandates as saying it is wise to resume pre-pandemic function.** It only means there is no longer State oversight of such matters. We would strongly encourage all our church leaders to take seriously the continuing recommendations provided by the Governor's Office, the New Hampshire Department for Health and Human Services and the Center for Disease Control.

At this time, the Conference (in accordance with CDC recommendations) continues to recommend masking at worship and church activities (regardless of vaccination). We continue to recommend social distancing during congregational gatherings. We also continue to recommend against congregational singing.

3. **We continue to recommend that in-person religious education activities, particularly for children and youth, not yet be resumed.**
4. **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>
5. **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 remains 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 that 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).
3. **On-site summer camps will be held at Horton Center in accordance with all the requirements the State has for this year.** Our Horton Center leadership has been working diligently to be able to put safety protocols in place that will allow for on-site camping. Regardless of vaccination history, all staff, volunteers and

campers will be required to receive a negative Covid test prior to coming to camp and be tested again once they arrive at camp. Masking will be a requirement during most camp activities. All camp activities are being reviewed and modified, as necessary, to look after the safety of our campers.

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>).