

May 20, 2021

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

“For the times they are a-changin’”

So let’s start with the really good news. Our statewide 7-day positive, test rate has dropped below 3%(*). Our number of daily new Covid cases is dropping steadily daily. As I have been promising, hitting such milestones does affect our recommendations. However, there remain some important geographic differences. The positivity rate in Coos County remains over 7%, so we are encouraging every church to consider the realities of their own community in their reopening discernment.

“For the times they are a-changin’”.

I know for some change is happening far too slowly, while others are not ready for the change yet. That is a part of being community. We all bring different hopes, fears, longings, needs, and perspectives to the community. We are reminded in our scriptures (1 Corinthians 12 to be specific), that the uniqueness’s we bring are to be valued by all in the community. I fail at being a good member of community – the community of the church – if I do not value what you bring as much as I value what I bring, or what anyone else brings. I believe this is so very important for us to remember during these times of change. We miss the mark on God’s call to be the Church, if we do not move forward in a way that honors the needs of everyone in our fellowship.

The times are changing. As they do, it is imperative that we embody the love of our God for one another in our decisions, in our actions, and in the ways we relate with one another.

For these changed days, I have some changed recommendations:

CHURCHES & CLERGY

1. Given the improving circumstances in many parts of the state, but also the differing circumstance in parts of the state, we can no longer offer guidance that is appropriate for all of our churches. **Therefore, it is the recommendation of the New Hampshire Conference that the leadership of each church discern the most appropriate time and circumstances for resuming indoor, in-person worship.** We have long recommended that a leadership team from each church discern how to best guide the church through re-opening. We would encourage such teams to work (in consultation with local health officials) on developing a plan that can be implemented in gradual ways so that everyone may return in a way that feels safe and welcoming to them. We also encourage consideration of

ministry outreach to those who have become part of your community through digital means but will not be able to physically join you for worship.

2. **Similarly, we believe the resumption of religious education and fellowship activities for youth and children are now a matter for local church discernment.** That said, our current encouragement would be for such activities to happen outdoors when possible.
3. **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>.
4. **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 of 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?

I have had people inquire as to the learnings of other churches. If you would be willing to share the reflections of your congregation on these questions, please send a short summary to me at grankin@nhcucc.org.

CONFERENCE

1. **The Conference Office is anticipating re-opening for public visits, meetings, and gatherings on Monday, August 16th.** One of the reflections of the Conference leadership has been that there was a lot more that we were able to do effectively in a virtual format than we would have imagined. Yet, some activities were absolutely diminished by not having the personal, relational connection. We would encourage Conference Ministries, Mission Groups, and others who meet at the Conference Office to thoughtfully consider the stewardship of their members commuting time and of the travel impact on God's creation when discerning when to meet in person, and when to meet virtually.

2. **We anticipate that our staff will resume in-person visits beginning September 1st.** Richard and I are pleased to talk about scheduling worship visits in the Fall. At the same time, we have also learned some things about effective use of staff time during the pandemic. Due to these learnings and our commitment to be good stewards of creation, there are some aspects of our Search and Call work with churches and our Committee on Church and Ministry work with Associations that we anticipate our staff will continue to do virtually. (I can meet with a couple of our search committees in one evening if I do it virtually. That is not possible if I have to travel.)
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 have received a negative Covid test prior to coming to camp, and to 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.
4. Things change at different paces. **Our Conference Annual Meeting will be held completely virtually again this year.** There has continued to be too many hurdles in the time needed for planning to bring together a community of our size in any manner other than virtually. We do believe that we will have a very exciting Annual Meeting, enhanced by some of the things we are able to do virtually, as we explore together “Building Beloved Community”. We are working towards having an in-person (likely still with some modifications) Prepared to Serve event on February 26, 2022 and Annual Meeting on October 15, 2022.

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>).