

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

We minister in uncertain times. The Covid-19 pandemic has challenged the church to find ways to minister to one another while also keeping one another safe. The following recommendations, resources, and announcements are made in the spirit of covenant to help us all find a faithful way forward:

## **CHURCHES & CLERGY**

- 1. I would encourage the leadership of all our New Hampshire Conference churches to consider discontinuing in-person public worship and all other public gatherings at least through the end of the month of March.** I am aware that a significant number of our churches made such a decision last Sunday and I thank you for your faithful discernment. I would urge all other churches to at least engage in similar discernment. Part of our missional imperative as the church is to protect the vulnerable. From all that we have learned about Covid-19, suspending public gatherings is the best way that we can help protect those at risk within our own congregations and to protect those at risk whom our congregants will eventually have contact with. Further, it has been resting upon my heart, that those we are to protect include not just those for whom the health consequence could be severe, but also those who lack adequate health care coverage for whom the financial consequences of becoming sick could be devastating. My Episcopal colleague, Bishop Hirshfeld, has referred to this as a time of “fasting” from corporate in-person worship. Like many of the fasts we practice during Lent, I believe that doing what we do as church in a different way - while abstaining for public contact - might well draw us deeper into the presence of the Divine.
- 2. I would encourage churches that are engaged with in-person interviews in the search and call process to either conduct such interviews by video or phone conferencing means or to postpone them.** Given all that we know about Covid-19, asking a candidate to travel and attend a group meeting with a search committee is simply an inappropriate ask. It increases the transmission risk for your candidate, your candidate’s family, your community, and the community your candidate is currently serving. Pushing ahead with in-person interviews at such a time as this may also mean that your church risks losing the interest of a good candidate.
- 3. The Conference Office will be doing our best to curate resources for churches.** We have already set up a page, Staying Safe in the Midst of Contagious Disease (<http://nhcucc.org/caring-for-congregations/staying-safe-in-the-midst-of->

[contagious-disease](#)), on the NHCUCC website to collect important information about Covid-19 and its implications for our churches. We would like to expand this resource for your use. I have witnessed over the past few days some profound and inspirational pieces of liturgy and devotion being written by those among us. We would like to curate a portion of our “Staying Safe” page that includes such resources. If you have written such a piece and are willing to share it, please send it to me at [grankin@nhcucc.org](mailto:grankin@nhcucc.org). *We ask that you only send things that you yourself have written and that you understand by doing so you giving us permission to share them for use by the wider church.*

Also, if your church is worshipping on Sundays via technology, I'd welcome receiving the link. We would love to post such links on our Conference Facebook page so that they are available to those in communities that do not have the resources to stream or record their services.

4. **I have prepared a pastoral note for our churches.** Without question, the leadership and community care happening in our churches right now has been inspiring. Pastors and Lay Leaders your faith is shining through these uncertain times. I offer this note solely to support the care you've already been providing. You may use it with your congregations if and how you like. The .pdf of the pastoral note is linked [HERE](#) and it can also be found on our Staying Safe page.
5. **This upcoming week we are holding two Zoom Check-In Conversation where our pastors and clergy can help resource each other on what is working during this unsettled season.** These conversations will take place Wednesday at 10 to 11:30 am and Thursday 5 to 6:30 pm. The Zoom link (<https://zoom.us/j/981363971>) is the same for both. Information for how to connect by telephone can be found on the Staying Safe page.

*[I worked on this writing over the weekend, only to learn Sunday night that the Center for Disease Control has recommended that there not be any gatherings of over 50 people for the next eight weeks. To be honest, at the moment I am struggling to get my head wrapped around that. It may well lead to some additional counsel in the days to come. In this ever-evolving situation we are likely to have many moments like this when information comes at us so relentlessly that its overwhelming. I'd encourage us at such times to take a deep breath (perhaps many) and focus on planning out the next week or two. If we get too far ahead of ourselves the information will change again before we get there. This also allows us the time to listen and learn from our sibling church. One of the things I can see clearly right now is that abundant grace is available to us in the wisdom and witness each other provides as we figure out together how to be church in such a time as this.]*

## CONFERENCE

- 1. Starting immediately, we will be closing the Conference Office to all meetings, gatherings and visits through the end of March. This will be extended if deemed necessary.** Our staff will do our very best to provide our Ministry Teams, Mission Groups and Board with the capability of continuing their work via Zoom video conferencing during this time. We would strongly encourage all Association Committees (including Committees on Church and Ministry) to meet exclusively by Zoom during this time as well. Our staff is eager to assist Association leadership with Zoom options as well.
- 2. During this time when the Conference Office is closed, our staff will be given the opportunity to work from home as they are able.** This may mean we will not always have someone available at the Office to answer phones. Please leave a message and we will return it when we are able. Email will most likely be the most effective means of communication with staff (with the exception of March 20-22, when the Conference Office will be migrating our Email Platform and staff will not have any access to email). Please also be aware that right now our staff is prioritizing supporting our churches in this time of Covid-19 and that other functions of the Conference may take a little longer than normal. We appreciate your patience and understanding.
- 3. Our staff will not be engaging in in-person visits to our churches through the end of March. Again, this may be extended if necessary.** This is for the welfare of our staff and of the churches we serve. In the case of search and call or other committee meetings, we will try to conduct them via video or phone conferencing. Visits for worship will need to be rescheduled.

Lenten Blessings,

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