

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

We minister in uncertain times. Covid-19 has changed our world in this season. Each day brings an unfolding of new griefs. Uncertainty deepens as we wonder when, and perhaps even if, things will return to normal. The news, at times, feels overwhelming. Covid-19 has also changed the church in this season. Many churches have moved worship on line (and from what I've been hearing they have people from across the country and around the world joining them). Not only is worship happening digitally but so is Bible study, devotions, storytelling, prayer groups and a variety of fellowship opportunities. Churches have instituted phone trees or other such methods to consistently and intentionally care for church members. Programs such as food banks are continuing to serve communities albeit in modified ways. Our world has changed. The good news – the news of grace and love – is that we have changed church to meet the needs of our changing world. Thanks be to God!

Two weeks ago, I offered a series of requests, resources and announcements for the month of March. Here is a new series of requests, resources and announcements for April:

#### **CHURCHES & CLERGY**

- 1. I would encourage the leadership of all our New Hampshire Conference churches to continue suspending in-person public worship and all other public gatherings through, at least, the second weekend in May.** The basis for this timing is the Center for Disease Controls recommendation that there be no gatherings of 50 or more people through that weekend. It also extends just slightly beyond Governor Sununu's current Stay at Home order. We are learning more about the spread of the virus day by day and this recommendation may yet be extended. Of course, while the basis for the timing is such factors, the basis for our decisions need to be our commitment to keep our churches safe places for all and our calling to love one another and our neighbors with the fullness of God's love.
- 2. I would continue to encourage churches involved in search and call to modify their work as necessary.** Much of the work of search and call can continue uninterrupted (though with digital meetings). However, in-person interviews should not be held at this time. Neutral pulpits are also not an option at this time. In-person interviews and neutral pulpits are tools for discernment. Your Conference Search and Call Staff can work with you to find alternative tools for discernment as needed.

- 3. The Conference will be continuing with regular installments of our Clergy Check-ins. This upcoming week our Zoom Check-In Conversations will focus on planning for Holy Week.** These conversations will take place on Tuesday (3/31) at 5 to 6:30 pm and Wednesday (4/1) at 10 to 11:30 am. 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. The week of April 13, we are planning for another round of Check-ins on the topic of finances.

Additionally, we are planning for a Clergy Check-in for non-parish clergy (chaplains, non-parish clergy, etc.) We are scheduling a Check-in for Church Administrators in April. Dates and Zoom information for these Check-ins will be announced soon.

- 4. The Conference is preparing a series of Holy Week Theological Roundtables that will be made available to all.** So many of our churches are producing wonderful worship, study and fellowship content in a digital format (and quite a lot of you have figured out how to do so really quickly). We do know, however, that for some of our churches this feels beyond their capacity. It has become really important to me that members of all our churches have some fresh spiritually, deepening digital content available to them in Holy Week. So I am digitally assembling some of our dynamic UCC theological minds to reflect on various parts of the Holy Week story. These Holy Week Theological Roundtables will be sent out to the Weekly News mailing list and posted on the Conference Facebook page, one each day from Palm Sunday through Easter. They will also be available on the Conference Web Site. You may use these in your church in any way you see fit. Thank you to everyone who is helping to produce these Roundtables.
- 5. Please keep a close eye on the Weekly News for postponements or cancellations of Conference events.** Many of our Conference events (such as the Youth Climate Summit, Administrative Professional Day gathering, ONA Roundtable, Implicit Bias Training, etc.) are being postponed to later in the year. Others, such as Clergy Days, are being moved to a digital format. There are other events such as this summer's National Youth Event that are doing both (on-line gatherings this summer and an in-person event in 2022). The Weekly News is the place to learn about all such adjustments.
- 6. 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>)

7. **We are continuing to learn about the new Families First Coronavirus Response Act legislation and its implications for our church.** The more we learn about this new legislation the more it seems it will impact most of our churches. There will be as section of resources regarding the FFCRA available on our Staying Safe in the Midst of Contagious Disease page. Among these resources is [this Employer Notice](#) which should be posted at all churches.

The UCC Insurance Board and UCC General Counsel will be offering a webinar on the FFCRA on Tuesday, March 31. Information to register for the webinar can be found in [this flyer](#). The webinar will be recorded and made available for boarder circulation.

I am in regular communication with the General Counsels' office regarding the FFCRA and stand ready to assist you with your questions as well.

8. **The Insurance Board has asked us to remind churches that while our buildings are empty it would be a good practice to assign one person to do a weekly walk through of church facilities to ensure that there are not maintenance issues which could escalate into greater damage.**

## ASSOCIATIONS

1. **I am asking the leadership of our Associations to postpone Spring Association Meetings and/or move necessary business to a Zoom format.** Several of our Associations have been already engaging in such discernment. Our Conference Staff stand ready to assist Associations with Zoom support for Spring Association Meetings and CoCM and Association Executive Committee meetings as well.

## CONFERENCE

1. **The Conference Office will remain closed to all meetings, gatherings and visits indefinitely.** The Conference Office will definitely remain closed throughout Governor Sununu's Stay at Home order. Beyond that the Conference Board of Directors and I will determine when the appropriate time for us to reopen the office to public access will be. Staff will predominately be working from home. Our intent is to forward phones so they can be answered during normal business hours. As you might guess our staff is figuring out how to serve

you in a new way. We also continue to prioritize supporting and resourcing our churches in this time of Covid-19. Some functions of the Conference may take a little longer than normal. We appreciate your patience and understanding.

- 2. Likewise our staff will not be making in-person visits to churches for an indefinite period of time.** 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 when we have a good sense for the appropriate timing.

Lenten Blessings,

Gordon