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**IOWA, NEBRASKA
& SOUTH DAKOTA**
• C O N F E R E N C E S •
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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May 15th, 2020

Dear Friends of the Iowa, Nebraska, and South Dakota Conferences of the United Church of Christ. I am the Reverend Brigit Stevens, your Conference Minister.

First, let me say, I miss you! I miss the hugs, handshakes, the coffee hours, and the smiles of being physically together! I even miss some of the driving to get to you! Not all of it, but a lot of it! Because I knew at the other end of each drive, I would get to be with you. I miss you.

And, I'm worried about you. I know that the Bible tells us not to worry, to give them over to God and let go of them ourselves. And I am reassured that the reason our scriptures tells us to do this, is because God knows that we need this reminding, over and over again. God knows that worrying is a part of being human, and we need God's help with it. So, I've been turning a LOT over to God in my prayers lately. Some things, I've been turning over and over again, like your safety and well-being. And the safety and well-being of your neighbors and your community.

I continue to be grateful for the work that our conference boards of directors did a little over one year ago in articulating our WHY statement for our conferences. It has been really grounding for me in this time. Why are we called to be the United Church of Christ in this time and in this place? To live into God's extravagant welcome and advocate for justice. So that, all know love, safety, belonging, and dignity.

Love, safety, belonging, and dignity. All. God's extravagant welcome. All. These are the words ringing in my heart and attached to each of my worries, my prayers, that I am laying at the foot of the cross.

THE question that the Associate Conference Ministers and I are being asked most these days is, "When can we gather again?" The truth is, I don't know. My whole being wants to give you a date. I want you to be able to mark your calendar so you can plan for that big celebration and reunion of sorts. But I don't know. I don't know when we will be able to open our physical doors so that all may know love, safety, belonging, and dignity there.

I DO know that the basic information about COVID-19 that inspired us to close our buildings in the first place, hasn't changed. It is still highly contagious, it still affects people who have other medical challenges and vulnerable immune systems in terrifying ways. And the best way to prevent its spread is to severely limit our contact with other people and wash our hands many times a day.

And the new information we have about the virus from the last few months, strengthens the advice of staying physically distant from others and washing our hands frequently. People of ALL ages, even babies and children, are contracting the virus and suffering significant illness, and sometimes

even death. There is evidence that the virus may travel further and hang longer in the air from the droplets in the breath of an infected person than previously known. Six feet between us, even for casual conversation, may not be enough. Some reports are pointing us to 13 feet, with face masks for everyone. And, lots of people are carrying the virus and don't have any symptoms, so they can share it without even knowing it.

Because the basic information hasn't changed, neither can the practices we have adopted over the last several weeks:

- Our congregations still have significant numbers of people in the groups highest at risk of death from contracting COVID-19.
- Although there are advances every day in research labs and clinics around the world, there is still no cure, proven treatment, or vaccine. My hope lies in the sheer numbers of brilliant human beings working on this! And, it normally takes years, not weeks, to develop vaccines and months for new treatments.
- We do know that the virus is transmitted in the air. So, even with disagreement about how it may be transmitted on other surfaces as well, being physically next to each other isn't safe. Even if your particular sanctuary has space to be marked off and provide 13 feet of distance in all directions between each family group in the pews or chairs, maintaining that distance would be impossible. On top of that, we sing together. When we sing, we expel air faster and further than when we speak. As we learned in the news reports of several choral groups that met in the early days of the pandemic, singing gatherings easily become disease transmission events.
- And, although there have been good advances in tracking where the illness has spread, tracking isn't a cure. Tracking shows us where physical distancing broke down and/or didn't work. It tells us where the virus has been so we may change our behavior and make further infections less likely.

Until there is a significant change in all these realities, it's not going to be safe for us to get together at church again for quite a while. I know there is a lot of talk about getting to work again and opening and closing parts of communities and commerce based on the local spread of COVID-19 and community needs. Generally, that makes sense. However, the number of people in our congregations who are at high risk, the way the spaces in which we gather for worship are set up, and what we do when we are together, make it unlikely that it will be safe for us to gather for some time.

Until there is some significant change in the information we are receiving, we need to plan on our current practices continuing at least into the fall of this year, but possibly for a year or more.

Take a deep breath. Let it out slowly. This is a lot to take in.

I recognize the challenges that this presents to you, to all of us, and that it leads to many, many hard decisions. To be honest, even creating this message was really difficult. I am afraid that some of you will react quickly with some version of our good old UCC saying, "You can't tell me/us what to do." It is true. I cannot make any congregation do anything. AND, it is my job and my

calling, to tell you what I believe you should do, in the best interest of our theology and ministry. And I am personally afraid of missing any opportunity to speak a word of advice or guidance that might just save someone's life.

I STRONGLY ENCOURAGE you, to form a task force in your congregation to share the burden of these hard, hard decisions. Invite your Associate Conference Minister or me to join you for a meeting or two as you make plans. Let us help you navigate the hard conversations and connect you with the resources you need: the CDC information, your insurance carrier, and others, to make good decisions.

I have faith in all of us to, with God's help, to pull this off. I am convinced that on the other side of this when we're all vaccinated and able to be together again, we're going to be amazed at what we, and God, have done. Right now, you are learning and growing and stretching, and although it isn't comfortable, it is fruitful! Many churches that are currently having worship online are reporting that attendance and participation is actually up. You are honing skills and learning new ways to do ministry with those who are homebound, because that's all of us now. You are becoming better at integrating those who cannot be physically present because of health concerns or other life circumstances. We are learning that, although our buildings are important, it is not our mission to serve them but to make sure they are in service to us and our communities. We will still go through some very hard times ahead but, in the end, I really am convinced we'll be better.

In the meantime, do what you can to protect the mental, physical, and spiritual health of those who are the lay and clergy leaders in your congregation. This is not a sprint. It is a marathon. The pace might not be as fast as it once was but we are all still running. **Insist that your pastor and your leaders take time off and rest.** Pay particular attention to those who might have children or dependents at home. They have been learning to be teachers and caregivers in new ways now, too. If you have skills that you might be able to offer that you haven't yet, offer them. If there are things you would be willing to learn to help, offer that, too. If you have the capacity to share more, financially, than you currently are please do since many are suddenly able to share nothing.

We will make it through this and we will be different. Maybe better. There will be much to grieve along the way but also time to laugh, pray, and get to know each other better, too.

Most of us recently read the story about the post-crucifixion disciples hiding in a room afraid and alone when, surprise! Jesus showed up. Pay attention dear siblings. Jesus is with us.

Blessings,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Brigit".

Brigit