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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 29th, 2020

Dear Pastors and Leaders of the Iowa, Nebraska, and South Dakota churches of the United Church of Christ,

Like so many others, I haven't slept very well the past few nights. I have been watching the footage of the pain and chaos in Minneapolis following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis Police. I have wept and raged and prayed and wept some more.

My soul screams out, "STOP. KILLING. BLACK PEOPLE." But it's not enough for just my soul to say it. My real voice, in my white body, needs to say it, loudly and clearly for all who can hear it. STOP. KILLING. BLACK PEOPLE. And your voice needs to be heard too.

Yesterday, I read a friend's shared Facebook post originally written by Dr. Oluwatomisin Oredein, Assistant Professor in Black Religious Traditions, Constructive Theology, and Ethics at Brite Divinity School. Dr. Oredein's words included a challenge to white Christians to reach out to our pastors and insist that they preach about white supremacy consistently and invite guest preachers who will do the same. And if our pastors refuse, waver, or want to compromise, Dr. Oredein asks us to leave that church. Yes, leave the church that baptized us, that married us, that buried our loved ones. She asks us to take that "radical, painful, risk of expanding our understanding and way of living as the church."

This is where the rubber hits the road, folks. Even the more progressive, liberal white Church is still a white Church. We talk a really good game. And...we have some serious confessing and changing to do. My gut twisted when I read Dr. Oredein's words, in that way that it does when someone speaks truth to me. So, I started thinking about what words I might string together to email my pastor, the Rev. Dr. Matt Mardis-LeCroy at Plymouth Church (UCC) in Des Moines. I worried, because he's my family's pastor. And I'm his Conference Minister. We are also friends and colleagues. It's not uncomplicated. And I know the hard conversations we've had as a congregation recently about our Black Lives Matter banner.

Just as I clicked the tabs to open my personal email account, I noticed my church's update on Facebook: our Black Lives Matter banner was going up and our newsletter explained it as a sign of our commitment to the spiritual practice of anti-racism! What a relief I felt that what I could type was not a potentially difficult string of requests to my friend and colleague, but an affirmation and celebration of the ministry being done. And I commit myself to continued cheerleading, and demanding as needed, for our anti-racism work to continue boldly at Plymouth Church. I want to celebrate the same sigh of relief when I hear or see your words from this week's worship service.

It is appropriate, I think, that this weekend we celebrate the church holiday of Pentecost. This is the Sunday when we remember and honor the gift of the Holy Spirit, and with that gift, the beginning of the Church. Following Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension to Heaven, we as

Christians, as disciples of Jesus Christ, understand that we, all of humanity, are not left alone. God has not abandoned us. We are accompanied and guided by the third member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

So fitting this weekend that the images of fire and breath are often used to represent the Holy Spirit. George Floyd said, "I can't breathe." And in the delay and denial of justice for Mr. Floyd, the fires of protest are burning. In the church, I have seen us use red and orange crepe paper and balloons to represent the tongues of flame we read about in the Pentecost account in the book of Acts. I guess that makes sense, because we don't want to burn down our church buildings with real fire. And yet, I don't believe for a second that the tongues of flame, as described in our scripture, were party decorations. Pretty and bright and cheerful. No, those flames caused chaos. They were disruptive. They made people angry and accusatory, pointing at the disciples to call them drunkards. Upsetting the organized festival taking place. Fire consumes all the oxygen and fuel in its path. It is destructive.

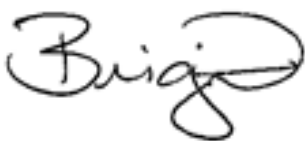
So, thank God, we have other images to use. Like breath and wind and soul, captured by the Hebrew word, "Ruach," Spirit. These feel safer for us, in the white Church. But I'm struck, that in these particular days of the Covid-19 pandemic, in our climate crisis when our very Earth is wheezing with pollution, and for George Floyd and so many others, even breathing is painful, and breath is not guaranteed to continue.

We, white Christian leaders, cannot look away. We must not be silent.

The pre-recorded sermon and prayers you put together earlier this week, aren't going to work. You are called to use your voices, pastors, with Christ's, on behalf of black and brown siblings who are suffering and suffocating at the hands of white supremacy.

I know, that not everyone in our congregations will agree with me, or with you. I know that the fear that speaking out in this very specific way may cost you your job is very real. I pray you will reach out to your Associate Conference Minister for advice and assistance if you are ever at odds with your congregational leadership, and specifically, over a matter such as this. And I pray that you will not let fear silence you. I worry for your employment and livelihood, but not nearly as much as I worry for your soul and the souls of whom you lead.

We are the United Church of Christ in this particular time and in this particular place, to live into God's extravagant welcome and advocate for justice. So that, all know love, safety, belonging, and dignity. Black lives matter. Our black siblings need us to remind the world of that truth and to dismantle white supremacy with all the tools available to us. God calls us to this task. I am praying for you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Brigit". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Conference Minister Rev. Brigit Stevens