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**IOWA, NEBRASKA
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• C O N F E R E N C E S •
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Hello Sisters, Brothers, and Siblings in Christ!

As the Conference Minister for the Nebraska, Iowa, and South Dakota Conferences of the United Church of Christ, I have a message for you today.

As we know, the global health pandemic of the Covid-19 virus has not ended. We continue to struggle with keeping our families, communities, and neighbors safe considering this debilitating virus.

I have some difficult guidance and direction to offer you again. And in full disclosure, many of my words today are echoing directly those shared by my colleague and friend, Conference Minister Mike Denton to the Pacific Northwest Conference this weekend. We Conference Ministers have been in constant communication about Covid-19, so it's no surprise that our messages are very similar these days. I am particularly grateful for the links to further information from Rev. Denton that you will see in the printed version of my remarks.

First, take a deep breath with me. And let it out slowly.

For several weeks now, we've been learning more and more about [COVID's Delta variant](#). In the last week, we've learned considerably more. There are several points that particularly jump out:

- COVID's [Delta variant is one of the most contagious respiratory diseases known](#). The main reason for this is that people sick with the Delta variant have [a viral load around 1000 times higher than the original Covid-19 variant](#).
- Although the likelihood of vaccinated people infecting others with Covid-19 has been low, [a CDC study that came out this past weekend suggests that vaccinated people can transmit COVID's Delta variant](#). Scientists keep learning more about the Delta variant of this virus and of the Covid-19 virus in general.
- And while vaccines are still the most effective defense against serious illness and death from all variants of Covid-19, the data regarding vaccinations and the Delta variant is currently coming in mixed regarding rates of protection from getting infected in general.
 - From Healthline.com: ["Data so far suggests efficacy rates of more than 67 percent for the J&J vaccine, 72 to 95 percent for the Moderna vaccine, and 64 to 96 percent for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine."](#)
 - Israeli studies are helpful because they had widespread vaccination early. They are finding that the [Pfizer vaccine has a 39% effectiveness rate at preventing infection](#). There is also evidence that [the vaccine's effectiveness wanes over time](#).
- There is growing evidence that, although the vaccines *do* seem to reduce the severity of COVID symptoms, there is still much that we don't know about the long-term effects of Covid infections. Preventing infections in the first place is our best protection for the health and well-being of everyone.

Taking this all in continues to be a lot for all of us to deal with. All of our families, communities, workplaces, and churches are affected.

Here I will share word for word what was written by my colleague Conference Minister Mike Denton in his latest post to the Pacific Northwest Conference, because he wrote it so well.

“As I’ve said before, and it’s really important that I say it again; I went to seminary, not medical school. I am not a scientist. I am a minister.”

“That said,” writes the Rev. Mike Denton, “there have been some consistent decision-making patterns regarding the pandemic [that we should pay attention to]. Many of those in politically influenced positions are uniquely vulnerable if they are wrong. There must be close to overwhelming evidence before they act. In that light, keep in mind the masking recommendations from the CDC that changed in the last week. The previous recommendation was that unvaccinated people should be masked indoors but that vaccinated people could be unmasked. The new recommendations that came out this past week are that [everyone should mask up indoors in communities where there is “substantial or high transmission.”](#)

Here’s the thing: when you see information that there is “substantial or high transmission” in your area, that information is already several days old. There’s a gap between when the people are tested, the time it takes to process the tests, and when the results are reported. So at the point you learn that you live in an area where there is “substantial or high transmission,” that’s probably been your reality for, at least, a week already.”

Now, according to multiple [reporting sites](#), many of the counties in South Dakota, Nebraska, and Iowa, are already experiencing, “substantial or high transmission,” rates.

I encourage the congregations of the Iowa, Nebraska, and South Dakota conferences to please require everyone to wear masks inside your church buildings, unless people are in individual offices with physical separation from one another, regardless of everyone’s vaccination status.

For those of you who are still meeting and worshipping only online, I strongly suggest that you continue to plan to do so until the conditions improve, and you can involve as many members as possible in the life of your church. Although some may choose not to be vaccinated, remember those who can’t be vaccinated because of age or medical condition. Remember, as well, those who are vaccinated but remain more vulnerable because of their medical conditions. Finally, remember those who might have tried to be vaccinated but have bodies unable to produce antibodies because of recent cancer or immune systems treatments, or other conditions that make them vulnerable to serious illness. There is a whole list of reasons why many of our people remain vulnerable. It’s our job to care for them.

For those who are meeting and worshipping in person, I encourage you to do what you can to stay ahead of the virus.

- **Regardless of whether or not there is “substantial or high transmission” reported in your community, I strongly suggest you require masks for everyone who attends worship and all gatherings, no matter what their vaccination status is.**

- **I also strongly suggest that, if you have been singing as a congregation, you suspend this form of worship until there is more clarity about the Delta variant.** With past variants, singing was determined to be one of the best ways to spread the virus. Masks help a lot, but singing can force air around the edges of a mask. Considering all the new information that we have about the Delta variant and how contagious it can be, it is best to treat congregational singing as a dangerous practice again.
- After considering all the new information we're learning and taking time to reflect on your congregation's demographics, **I also encourage you to discuss again whether or not you can continue to have in-person worship safely,** especially considering the Delta variant.

I know this is really hard news to take in, again. I am holding you in my prayers and sharing your tears of grief, frustration, and sorrow for all the pain that this virus is delivering in our communities and around the globe.

We need each other. Covid-19 continues to teach us this truth in important and devastating ways. Let's heed those lessons and lean into the invitation to continue caring for one another in very tangible ways.

As you might guess, your conference staff continues to hold you all in our prayers, and we will continue serving you via Zoom, and emails, and phone calls for the time being. We will continue to not travel for our work, if at all possible. We will attend meetings, celebrations, and worship services, virtually, as we have been doing since March of last year. We covet your invitations to join you and your congregation via Zoom or Facebook live, or by asking for a video or written greetings from us to be shared among you. Please let us know how we may continue to connect with you and support your ministry. The Tri-Conference Ministries Board of Directors and I continue to watch the recommendations of health officials nationally and locally. We continue review and make decisions to protect our employees, serve our congregations and clergy, and promote the safety, love, belonging, and dignity of all.

Many blessings and prayers.

Thank you.

Rev. Brigit Stevens
Executive Conference Minister

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Brigit". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized initial "B".