

October 22, 2020

Greetings friends across the Wisconsin Conference United Church of Christ!

Grace and Peace to you in the midst of these turbulent times. As the pandemic numbers in Wisconsin continue to rise at alarming rates, we face an all-out crisis. Our health care system is stressed. The lives of thousands more may be in danger, even as the livelihoods of many have been severely impacted.



This dramatic spike in both cases and deaths necessitates we take every possible precaution and place the safety of our family and all our neighbors (our friends and those we don't know) first. Just yesterday, Wisconsin recorded 4,591 new cases and 18 more deaths. Over 1600 people have lost their lives in our state to COVID-19 and, over the past few weeks, we have become an epicenter for the rapid transmission of this virus.

In alignment with the guidance of the Wisconsin Council of Churches and Governor Evers' order limiting public gatherings, **the Conference field Staff and I strongly urge all congregations to resist in-person gatherings.** We recommend remote worship for the duration of the fall season. For those congregations who have resumed outdoor or strictly protocolled in-sanctuary worship, I recognize this is a discouraging setback. But I ask you to join in this critical effort to once again flatten the curve and lower the cases.

Pastors and lay leaders, I know this long chapter of social distancing feels exhausting and seems never-ending. If ever there were a time for enduring with patience, for doubling down on diligence, and for offering abundant grace even in our frustration -- now is that time!

In many instances our pastors are placed in impossible predicaments. The pressures of health concerns and the worries of the economy quickly become polarizing issues. They are both important, but we can't fix the economy until we curtail the virus. Right now, our highest calling as a united and uniting Church of Christ is to take care of one another and to extend compassion to all.

The next few weeks will be pivotal, both in terms COVID-19 and the election. Every congregation has good people all across the pandemic and political spectrums. This a time to be bigger than our differences and better than our divisions. Especially now, the Gospel begs us to engage one another with love and reconciliation.

One thing is for sure – no matter the outcome of the presidential election – some people in every congregation will feel disappointment and grief, even bitterness and despair. The question is: What healing and unifying role can the Church play?

For many of us, it may be helpful to emotionally and psychologically pre-process some of the aftermath scenarios. Especially if we enter into a time of prolonged unknowns and anxiety over unclear election results, we will need to be ready for a time of potential social

angst and unrest. What will prove vitally important is a steady pastoral presence and strong, supportive lay leadership.

Here are some strategies to ponder and practice:

- Prepare to engage people with a non-anxious presence
- Pause for prayer and intentional invoking of the Holy Spirit
- Promote listening with empathy
- Demonstrate an extra measure of grace
- Emphasize the need for the beloved community to support each other
- Recognize the inherent goodness (the imago dei) in every person

In the meantime, friends, while we always take care not to preach politics, we also know that the Gospel speaks to the times at hand. The values we share across the United Church of Christ about social justice and wide welcome are as relevant today as ever. If Jesus taught us anything by example, he taught us that the oppressed and marginalized need a voice and deserve every ounce of dignity and every opportunity for a good life, that we ourselves desire.

Finally, Jesus teaches us that integrity matters, that honesty and truth are the foundations of trust. That humility and grace are important attributes not just for our faith leaders but for leaders in all dimensions of life.

Together we lift up all leaders in prayer. We pray for peace and for calm in the coming days. So, take heart. Keep the faith. And let us hold fast to the confession of our HOPE without wavering, for the One who promises all our tomorrows remains ever faithful.

Blessings and best of health to you!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Franz".

Rev. Franz Rigert
Conference Minister