



# Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Nebraska

237 South 70<sup>th</sup> Street, Suite 221  
Lincoln, Nebraska 68510

Telephone: 402.476.0359  
[www.disciples-ne.org](http://www.disciples-ne.org)

September 6, 2020

Dear Friends, Church Leaders, and Church Members ---

**Rev. Chris Morton**  
Regional Minister &  
Cotner College Director  
253-363-1599 (cell phone)  
[regmin@ccnebr.org](mailto:regmin@ccnebr.org)

**Carol Burnley**  
Administrative Assistant  
[adminasst@ccnebr.org](mailto:adminasst@ccnebr.org)

**Teresa Olberding**  
Disciples Women's  
Ministries  
Coordinator  
[teresadwm@yahoo.com](mailto:teresadwm@yahoo.com)

**Paul Few**  
Disciples Men's Ministries  
Coordinator (Volunteer)  
[pfefew@hotmail.com](mailto:pfefew@hotmail.com)

**Holly Gage**  
Youth Ministry  
Coordinator  
[youthministrynebraska@gmail.com](mailto:youthministrynebraska@gmail.com)

On August 15<sup>th</sup>, the Christian Church In Nebraska's Regional Board voted to continue to suspend Regional Events, Regional Staff Travel, Regional Staff In-Person meetings, and maintain a Virtual Regional Office until after January 1, 2021.

The Board asked me about my thoughts, then, about our Local Churches worshipping in-person. I shared with the Board that I believe that Local Churches should suspend the question of *when* to worship in-person by agreeing to *not* do so until after January 1, 2021.

The Board decided that it was important to take action and adopted the following Resolution: *The Christian Church In Nebraska, in line with their own decision to suspend in-person gatherings, strongly urges our Local Churches who are autonomous, to consider not gathering in-person until at least January 1, 2021.*

This letter will be my way of thinking out loud with you, so I hope you will read it in its entirety. There are two parts to the letter: a theological and Biblical reflection, and an exploration of "being church during the pandemic."

Let me contextualize those two parts of the rest of the letter. On June 14<sup>th</sup>, I shared with you some words that I want to repeat here, because they are an important reminder of our covenantal relationship in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). We are in relationship, and I have no authority over any Local Church, nor any individual Christian. Rather than authority, it is my love for you, and your love for me, that holds us in covenant together. And, as has always been true since I have become your Regional Minister, I journey alongside each of you, as a Local Church, and as a person of faith:

*It's not a matter of "if" the church will gather in-person, but a question of "when" and "how?" I implore you to consider to not gather in-person for the foreseeable future. But I am also aware that our covenantal relationship honors and respects the integrity of the Local Church as, not independent, but autonomous. Local Church leaders throughout Nebraska are wrestling in each of their own communities with the question of "when and how shall we gather in-person again?" I honor your discerning God's desires for you to that question.*

**First, the question of our faith.** Our Moderator, Rev. Eileen Kunz, and I wrote you in March. That letter was the result of Eileen and I talking together about how we were thinking about worshipping in-person. In that letter, and in my letters to you since, I have sought to remain grounded in two core teaching of our Christian faith: 1) love thy neighbor, and 2) Christian hospitality. Instead of simply naming those two tenets here, though, will you allow me a word or two more?

We are instructed by our Scriptures that ***the greatest commandment*** is ". . . 'you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Whether the story is recounted in Mark (12: 28-31), as shared here, or in Matthew (22:35-40), or Luke (10:25-28), or John (13:31-35), they are all a recounting of the *Shema*, a daily prayer said by Jews, captured in Deuteronomy 6: 4-9.

One of the greatest ways that we express our love for God is in our love for our neighbors. Jesus told us, his followers, a parable to help us cut through the clutter of the question “who is my neighbor.” Jesus told us that a Samaritan – a non-Jew, someone who was unclean by Jewish ethics – was the neighbor who helped a man who “fell among robbers.” (Luke 10: 25-37) A Levite and a priest, both considered to be upright and faithful Jews, were not exemplary neighbors in that moment because Jesus conveyed a neighbor as a person who shows mercy to those in need.

For me, then, I ask myself:

*“What does it mean for me as a Christian, and us as Church, to be a good neighbor?  
Or, more specifically, how can I show mercy to others, particularly others in need?”*

**Christian Hospitality:** The response to both questions is a single word, and that word is “hospitality.” Our current practices in the Church demonstrate a commitment to hospitality. That is, we show generosity and courtesy to one another. Which is one form of, and understanding of hospitality. The nature of Biblical hospitality, though, is *philoxenia* – a word that means *love to strangers*. Bringing me back to the man who fell among robbers, and the Good Samaritan. And it takes me to another use of the same word as written in Hebrews 13:2 when the author writes “do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers (*philoxenia*), thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”

No matter whether the person is family, friend, acquaintance, or stranger, “radical hospitality” extends our love for each person – just as we would want to be loved. As the Local Church has considered whether to return to in-person worship, or not, **much consideration has been given to the needs of our members:** the need for community, connection, and hospitality. As ministers, we hear the voices of the members of the churches that we serve, and we also hear the voices in the community who often hurl insults at the church and their minister. Please know that I am sensitive to those demands, and am aware that there is a great grind on our ministers, and the Local Church --- both those who have chosen to return to in-person worship, and those who have not. The push and pull for the minister and the church to worship in-person, and to not worship in-person is pervasive, gnawing at the very fabric of our relationships, community, and sense of hospitality. There is no doubt that we want to be together; the question continues to be “when?” and “how?”

Reflecting on our core teachings, though, we are left to wrestle with the question of “who is my neighbor?” And remembering that being a neighbor is really about showing mercy to others, particularly the stranger.

Our church members and those who worship with us regularly are people we know and love. However, the circles with whom our members are in community extend beyond our worshipping family and include many “strangers.” Those strangers, who live in nursing homes or share the desk next to our children in school, those strangers who exercise in gyms or eat at the table nearby, they, too, are our neighbors. Strangers to whom we are also called to show mercy in love.

*My friends, as we have journeyed together these past six months with a virus that has become a pandemic, and as we journey forward into an unknown future, I invite each of you to consider these core teachings of Christianity.*

*Do we place our love for God and neighbor above all else?  
How do we express our love for God and our neighbors – including the strangers?*

**The second consideration** is more about the question “What does it mean to be The Church?” Again, you’ve heard me talk about this in other venues, but I want to explore this question more fully here, if you don’t mind reading a little bit further.

*What if we suspended the question of “When will we worship in-person?” until after January 1, 2021?  
What would that do to our focus, and our energy?*

Living during a pandemic is taking its toll on all of us, whether we know it, or acknowledge it, or not. At least, for me, I am feeling tired, even more exhausted. I am edgy and more easily frustrated. The amount of energy that I have is diminished, as I spend a great deal of time trying to figure out how to be and stay connected with each of you, others in the Church, my own family and friends, as well places where I am involved in the community. Yes, there are times when my soul cries out how much simpler and easier it would be to simply worship in-person and connect that way. But, my soul is in conflict, because it also knows that such in-person contact with groups of people brings great risk – to the people, to me, and to the other people with whom each of us come in contact after we depart from our gathering. Which leaves me carrying around the question of “When?” will our churches gather in person again; a question that seems like an added weight that might make my load lighter if I could suspend that question until a ***known time into the future; say, January 1, 2021.***

It isn’t only the single question of “When?” is it? Because the question of “When?” includes all of the considerations that come with gathering in-person for worship. For instance, I know that we are all concerned about our members who are over the age of 65, as well as people who have co-morbidities/underlying health conditions. We know that these two groups of people are both at the top of the DHHS list of who should **not** worship in-person (Nebraska Department of Health & Human Services: <http://dhhs.ne.gov/Documents/COVID-19-Guidelines-for-the-Conduct-of-Faith-Based-Services.pdf>). And we are also acutely aware that these two groups of people make-up much of our worshipping community. And, yet, some of the people who are elderly and/or have underlying conditions are the strongest voices for returning to worship in-person. What makes things even more confusing is that many of the people who are in these two categories are really struggling with whether to return, often saying that they will do what the church decides because they want to be faithful and supportive; even when they fully understand that they are at a greater risk of being infected with COVID-19.

And then there is the stress added to our members and our ministers, both of whom are wondering if they might be a carrier (often quietly, reflectively to themselves, beneath the public image or surface); and whether they are carriers is often not known to themselves or to anyone else. Unless and until they are tested. Add to the stress of carrying around the weight of those questions is the energy that we (ministers and members) expend trying to avoid the possible spread of the disease with all of the cleaning and sanitizing of so many surfaces throughout the church building, making masks and hand sanitizer available, and the maintaining of a safe social distance with people who are used to hugging, or at least shaking hands. Underlying all of these precautions and worries is the added burden that eventually someone in the worshipping community will test positive for COVID-19. But most of our ministers and lay leaders will say that that’s OK; that they are willing to give of themselves in such a way to serve the members.

The net effect, though, is that COVID-19 is creating a very high level of *additional* stress to an already stressful life; for ministers and members of churches personally, and as communities of worship. Yet, we navigate it as if all of this is normal. Because we are used to carrying a lot of stress. So much so that when we are asked “How are you doing?” we respond with the same response as 6 months ago: “I’m fine.”

Pause here for a minute and reflect on the following question; “How do I know if I am fine if we are living in such an unusual, unprecedented time of a pandemic?” How do we know if we are fine? If we are living in this pandemic, something none of us have ever done, and we are noticing that we are making unusual decisions, maybe even some bad choices that we wouldn’t normally make, and we are more tired, irritable, lonely, and discontent, how do we know if we are truly fine? Into these stress-filled times, times weighed down by our concern for our neighbors including the strangers amongst us, a prolonged period of stress and strain, we continue to claim that we are “fine.” Maybe it would be OK for us to say to one another, “I don’t know for sure, but I have noticed that I am more tired and more easily frustrated. So, if I bark or growl at you, please accept my apologies on the front end,” as you chuckle a little bit.

What if, in the midst of all of this uncertainty about a disease that is killing thousands of people in our country every day, and adding more than 300 new COVID-19 cases each day in Nebraska (using a 7-day average for August 31<sup>st</sup>), we decided to take a pause. What if we said, “Let’s accept that COVID-19 has the potential to effect each of us individually, and each of our churches.”

**Can we ask ourselves:**

***“What does it mean to be the Church during a pandemic?”***

*“How can I/we be a good neighbor?” ~~~ “What does hospitality look like for us during a pandemic?”*

My invitation to each of you is to agree that we will worship in-person sometime after January 1<sup>st</sup>, and resolve here and now to use the released energy of “worrying about when” to focus our attention on God’s call upon our lives, as individuals and as the community of faith that we call the Church. Let’s continue to ***be the Church*** – a worshipping community, who calls upon and shares Communion with those who are isolated, who studies and learns together, who finds creative ways to be connected with one another in fellowship, and who serves the needs of our communities.

*With God’s Peace  
Chris*