



HEARTLAND CONFERENCE

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
N. KY • OH • WV

A PASTORAL LETTER REGARDING WORSHIP & COMMUNITY PRACTICE FROM THE HEARTLAND CONFERENCE LEADERSHIP ROUNDTABLE

January 11, 2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

As we write to you, the effect of the Omicron variant of the COVID virus is currently reaching levels of impact and death previously unimaginable since COVID became a part of our daily lives almost two years ago. There is a weariness and malaise that has left no one untouched. Our hospitals are overwhelmed, and our medical and other front-line workers are exhausted. Medical experts are now talking about the ongoing reality of COVID for the long term. Some of you have asked what counsel we would offer regarding congregational practices in this particular wave of the COVID crisis.

In some ways the practices offered below are nothing new, but we felt it would be helpful to name them again as the Omicron variant demands ongoing intentionality of practice to mitigate Omicron's deadly impact. We remind you of them here:

- **Doctors widely urge that all children and adults who can get vaccinated should get vaccinated and boosted.** This has been shown to significantly lower the impact of the Omicron variant. Those without vaccination are at a much higher risk of COVID contraction, serious complications, and death. While those who have been vaccinated and boosted may still get the Omicron variant, its impact is lessened, and death is much less likely.
- **Wearing masks for indoor gatherings** continues to be an important practice to mitigate the spread of COVID. Wearing masks outdoors is also recommended when socializing with people outside of your immediate bubble (household) if social distancing of at least 6 feet is not consistently maintained.
- **Six feet of physical distance** is still the ideal when groups gather in-person who are not part of your regular daily social bubble.
- **Regular hand washing (for at least 20 seconds) and not touching one's mouth, eyes or nose** is an important practice to prevent the virus from entering one's body.

We recognize that each congregation has unique circumstances when it comes to sanctuary size and how the Omicron variant of COVID is moving through any given community. This means that local discernment will continue to be a vital part of your congregation's considerations regarding practice of in-person gathering. If in-person gatherings continue, we strongly urge the wearing of masks. In some situations where safe distancing is not possible, it may be best to return to only online worship until this current spike subsides. Fortunately, many congregations now have the capability to engage this option.

While we are all exhausted by what COVID continues to demand of us, we pray that the counsel of Paul to the Philippians would be the guiding star of all our words and actions: "...in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." (*Phil. 2:3b-5a*). May this Spirit of Christ dwell deeply in us all. Please know we hold you all in our prayers continually.

Blessings on you!

The Heartland Conference Leadership Roundtable Members: David Long-Higgins (Conference Minister), Daniel Busch (Northwest Association Minister), Patricia Battle (Central Southeast Association Minister), Nayiri Karjian (Living Water One Association General Minister), and Carl Robinson (Southwest Ohio Northern Kentucky Association Minister)

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