



January 25, 2022

Dear Clergy and Laity of the Dakotas Conference of The United Methodist Church,

Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ, our healer and our hope.

As the spread of the Omicron variant of the COVID-19 virus continues across our beloved states, nation and world, we are writing to give both a word of encouragement and also cautionary guidance as we seek to care for our churches and communities throughout the Dakotas.

The pandemic continues to be one of the major challenges facing the church today. Just for perspective, in South Dakota, there are 36,200 active cases, with 1,416 new positive tests reported on Monday, January 24, 2022. In North Dakota, there are 9,603 active cases with 350 confirmed positive tests reported on Monday. Unfortunately, this means we are also seeing a significant increase in hospitalizations. As you may know from the reports of the North Dakota and South Dakota Public Health officials and the CDC, vaccinations and mask wearing are the two most critical means of caring for others and for yourself as the pandemic continues to wreak havoc in our communities and world. [View North Dakota data here](#). [South Dakota data can be viewed here](#).

In response to the rise of cases in the Dakotas, and in support of healthcare and other frontline workers (community leaders) who are battling the surge, we strongly urge our churches to continue or return to the practice of masking for worship and for all events happening in your local churches. There may also be faith communities who choose at this time to move to remote only options for ministry. We want the leadership teams in our churches to make the best call for your context on when to be in-person or online as we ride out this current wave of the pandemic.

We know the effects of pandemic exhaustion and COVID fatigue are being felt at every level of our church and society and are affecting us in mind, body, and spirit. We may find ourselves in the company of deep grief or discouragement as we look at the toll of the pandemic on human life, our education system, our healthcare system, and all those showing up day-to-day to do the work before them. If you or they are overwhelmed and are in need of mental health support, please reach out to your local provider or to the helpline of [North Dakota](#) or [South Dakota](#).

We cannot even begin to adequately express how proud and inspired we are by you and by the ministry you continue to offer across the conference; you have been a witness of hope, compassion and resilience since the arrival of the COVID-19 in the U.S. in January 2020. Pastors, if you are in need of an extra level of support, please reach out to your District Superintendent so that we can get you properly and adequately resourced.

While none of us anticipated the pandemic lasting into a third year, we do believe we have and will continue to see the goodness of God and God's people at work through the Dakotas Conference of the United Methodist Church. This is evidenced every time we show up for one

another and in our communities embodying hope made real as we care for our neighbors both near and far.

Finally, as disciples of Jesus, may we do our part to promote the resources and guidance made available through public health, attend to the spiritual and temporal needs of all generations - especially the most vulnerable, and witness in our communities and beyond on behalf of the One known as the healer from Galilee, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

In Christ,
Bishop Laurie and the Dakotas Conference Cabinet