



## Warning Labels

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In 2020, on the eve of the global lockdown due to the spread of the then mostly unknown COVID-19 virus, my father took sick in New York. I spoke with my sister who also lives in New York to determine what we should do about his care. We discussed options which included me leaving Ohio for New York to assist and be closer for decision making. My sister's opinion was clear. She said: "Don't come here! I don't want you to come here and get sick. You could die." She was at the epicenter of the spreading illness, concerned for me and my well-being. Her "don't come" here created challenges for me as I wondered about the threats to her health.

I have heard "Don't come here" many times. The caution always leaves me wondering. And what about the people who are already there? What options do they have to reduce their risk, or to get away from impending danger? These warning labels at times come from overseas partners who have a perspective on dangers that are not widely known. This was the case in 2011 as plans were being made for a United Church of Christ delegation to Syria. Syrian partners advised of the turmoil in the country well ahead of the yearslong civil war and unrest. They told us then: "Don't come here."

"Don't go there" is a different matter. I travel extensively and hear this many times related to global travel. "Don't go there" is at times more challenging for me to process and to accept. I rarely get questions or concerns of safety when I am going to Europe, to Canada or traveling in the United States. Questions of safety for travel are typically posed for poor and developing countries. And it is very rare that the United States gets the often-needed warnings regarding the safety of tourists. The United States State Department has a

webpage dedicated to [travel advisories](#) for other countries which range from Level 1: Exercise Normal Precautions to Level 4: Do Not Travel. There are currently 20 countries with a Level 4 alert.

Yet, safety is a concern for many who reside in these United States. People of color, religious minorities, the LGBTQIA+ community, and other minorities live with the risk of violence and discrimination. There are often no warning labels to indicate the possible harm that is present in our communities, our cities and our states from inherent bias, discriminatory laws, microaggressions, and violations of civil and human rights. The truth is that there are no perfect places. The history of the [green book](#) is a reminder of the lack of safety that faced African Americans as they travelled in the United States. We no longer have a green book, yet concerns for safety are real even in these days of twenty-first century living.

What value are we placing on the lives of those who exist in places where rights are violated, where health and well-being is at stake, or where war and strife persist? It feels like an inadequate response to caution against visiting countries or cities, especially when some of those perceptions are rooted in bias that does not consider “here” and “there” on equal terms. And as assessments and labels are placed “there,” are we willing to name the dangers “here” for millions of lives?

The quest for a just world for all is one that invites our confrontation with uncomfortable truths. “Don’t come here” is a confrontation with the reality of where one lives. “Don’t go there” is an invitation to interrogate the biases that come with naming “there” as other.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson serves as the General Minister and President/Chief Executive Officer in the National Setting of the United Church of Christ.

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