

CPMC Conference Ministers and Congregational Pastors

Wednesday, April 29, 2020

Susan Janzen opened the meeting with a prayer exercise from First Mennonite Church, Iowa City, IA:

- Close your eyes and take several deep, cleansing breaths.
- Open your eyes and take several more, deep breaths.
 - Pay attention to what you are hearing.
 - Look around you and pay attention to what you are seeing.
 - Turn your thoughts inward and note what you are feeling in this moment.
- Savor each sensation. Thank God for these gifts of our senses, of the friends gathered here, and for the gift of time together.

The topic of discussion today concerns re-opening our common lives together or how do we make the decisions on how and when to gather together in person again. Pertinent questions include:

- What new practices have we learned that we want to hang on to?
- What things do we feel ok about letting go?
- What have we had to lay aside during this time that we can leave behind?

When to go back to congregational worship in an in-person setting? When to go back to having small groups such as committees meet together in person? Suggested to listen to respected scientists and physicians and to consider the most vulnerable among us to guide our timeline for reentering into face-to-face gatherings.

Location makes a big difference. Suzanne Ford, Zion MC in Donnellson, IA, noted that restrictions have been lifted for their county, but surrounding counties have active, confirmed cases of the virus. The church council is meeting tonight to decide if they are ready to reopen for Sunday morning worship at church. If they do, it will be with the recommendation that everyone wear a mask, social distance, and that the facility be sanitized both before and after the gathering. Pastors are faced with the question of going and meeting with those people, often the most vulnerable, who choose to stay home. Karen Martens Zimmerly, First MC, Iowa City, IA, is in a county that is still under restrictions. She recommended listening to local county officials and physicians to guide the decision-making process, noting that officials in higher levels of government are removed from the situation on the ground in any given location. And Ramiro Hernandez, Iglesia Menonita Jesus El Buen Pastor, Muscatine, IA, noted there are lots of people still getting infected in his congregation/area, so they are not reopening for at least 2 more weeks.

The county in northeastern Colorado where Julesburg Mennonite Church is located has no *confirmed* cases of the virus, so they are planning to gather on Sunday for in-person worship in their building. They will be implementing social distancing, requiring face masks and placing sanitizer at several stations in the building. An usher will open the door for all persons

entering/leaving. There will not be congregational singing. Dismissal will be by rows and everyone will go directly outside, with no congregating in the foyer. The offering will be collected in a box, with a hole in the lid, placed by the door and donors drop their donation inside. Their congregation has been livestreaming for the last 1.5 years and will continue to do so. They have come to the decision to gather in person by discussing it with the congregation. They stress that there is no shame in choosing to come, or choosing to stay away, at this time. The stress of social distancing has become harder than facing the threat of the virus. They are looking at this as an opportunity to re-evaluate where the church is spiritually. "Where is God in this?" is a question they are asking. Larry Nail suggested that maybe it is God's mercy, using this pandemic to call us back to God's own self. God is the god of opportunity.

Hall County, Nebraska, where Wood River is located, has one of the fastest growing rates of infection in the state of Nebraska. They expect the peak to come in the next two weeks. Churches have been informed by letter that it is up to them to decide when to start meeting, but the letter also discouraged them from returning to in-person gatherings too soon. Recommended waiting until 10-14 days after peak infection rate to begin making plans on when to restart gathering in person again. One suggestion was to have multiple services so social distancing can be implemented. The Wood River church owns a soft-serve ice cream machine, so Matt Troyer-Miller said they are thinking about a gathering of some sort that would include ice cream cones and social distancing, so people could meet in some way.

On the other hand, Fillmore County, Nebraska, where Salem Church (Shickley) is located, has one confirmed case of the virus. Regardless, Shawn Nolt said that no one wants reopening the churches to gather in person to be the spark that ignites the spread of the virus in their area. They are wondering if churches will be willing to pay salaried janitors additional wages for the added work of sanitizing the facility. They have considered having a drive-in or on-the-lawn (sitting in lawn chairs) worship gathering, but the wind can carry the virus over greater distances more quickly than social distancing would protect from in an enclosed building scenario.

Nick Detweiler Stoddard, Salem MC, Freeman, SD, pointed out that many churches in CPMC enjoy a high level of white privilege, with people affluent enough to work from home and avoid crowded working conditions. Yet 68 percent of infections in South Dakota are in the non-white population among people employed in occupations/essential services that force them into close contact with others who then spread infection to their coworkers. Nick noted that his church has found a level of intimacy gathering via Zoom that surpasses even meeting face-to-face and so they are not eager to resume meeting face to face. They have discussed a drive-in service but prefer the ZOOM platform and the opportunities it provides for personal interactions.

Andrea Wall, Bethesda MC, Henderson, NE, has been encouraging families to engage in intergenerational faith formation activities and practices. She is not eager to return to the former patterns of faith formation but would like to take this opportunity to strengthen intergenerational faith formation models.

David Heusinkveld, West Union MC, Parnell, IA, asked "Who decides when to begin meeting again?" Their decision to not meet was made very quickly, by a small group of people, but the decision to resume meeting can (and should) be made by a larger group over time.

Some other questions like “When do you allow the church office to reopen?” and “When do you allow renters to return to the space?” are spoken to in an article by the Wisconsin Council of Churches posted on our website. “Returning to Church” lays out a phased-in timeline for these and many other aspects of congregational life.

Susan asked if we see these new realities as opportunities for reflection and growth: What are the best ways to engage Scripture, to be in fellowship with one another? What have we learned about being in community during social distancing? What can we carry forward from this experience to strengthen ties?

Corey Miller, Salem-Zion MC, Freeman, SD, asked how this pandemic is affecting the work of the Conference Ministers. The Conference Ministers responded:

- Events have been cancelled or rescheduled until a later date.
- Annual Meeting will be virtual. Be watching for information coming out in the next week.
- They are not travelling at this time and do not know when they will resume in-person meetings and church visits. They continue to plan for in-person visits to churches this fall and winter.
- They are engaging in virtual preaching for congregations that they had planned to visit in person.
- They are meeting with church search committees by ZOOM. Churches are exploring how to do candidate interviews and candidating weekends virtually.
- The CMs are meeting individual pastors by ZOOM to support and resource them.
- They are currently working from home, coming into the Kalona offices on Wednesdays.
- They are still available to assist churches. Just contact them and they will find a way to meet virtually.
- It feels like we’ve learned the basics of virtual meeting. We will need to keep learning to get the Annual Meeting to be a seamless virtual meeting.
- The work of the Conference Ministers goes on, just in different ways!

Before ending the gathering with prayer, Susan reminded pastors to tend to their own physical, spiritual, and emotional health. Be assured that the conference ministers are praying for pastors and congregations in this time (and always).