

CPMC Conference Ministers and Congregational Pastors

Wednesday, May 6, 2020

Susan Janzen opened the meeting with a prayer. She congratulated Joel Beachy on his graduation from AMBS with his M.Div. degree.

The topic for discussion today revolved around emerging from our on-line congregational life into more in-person ways of interacting again and what that might look like.

Amanda Bleichty shared a short video with the group about our VUCA times (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous). The video shared strategies for working with the members of your organization once you have made the decision to start meeting again in person. The link is on the CPMC website.

Amanda also introduced “Now What?” a resource for pastors and congregations to use as they reflect on these months:

- “What have we experienced during this time?”
- “What do we want to hold onto that is new from this time?”
- “What do we want to leave behind?”

“Now What?” is available on the CPMC website, as are several articles that address the questions of emerging from this time of social distancing and returning to in-person gatherings. It was stressed that this is a fruitful ministry time, not just a time when the church has been on pause.

Galen Kauffman – Bethel, MN – He has formed an ad hoc reconnecting group to discuss how they will begin to emerge from this time of virtual church. He has a list of 12 questions to consider regarding getting back together in person.

Larry Nail, Julesburg, CO – shared their experience as a congregation that met together in person this past Sunday, May 3. There are still no confirmed cases in their county. If/when cases become confirmed, the church will go back to livestream only services.

- Larry had contacted the Chief of Staff at their local health facility prior to the Sunday service. This person is a cautious individual and has been working with Larry to determine a safe time to return to in-person gatherings. He was present at the Sunday service on May 3.
- Phone calls went out to everyone. Each family/individual was encouraged to consider whether to come to church or remain at home. It was stressed that there would be no shame in anyone’s decision whether to attend or not. This is a personal decision and would be respected by others.
- They blocked off every other pew for seating.
- People came into the church one family at a time. If 2 cars arrived at the same time, one was asked to wait until the other had entered the building.
- An usher opened and closed the doors to the building for everyone.

- There were sanitizing stations set up at various locations in the building.
- Dismissal was row by row with instructions to go directly outdoors and maintain social distancing on the parking lot. (minor mishaps with this one. One person shook hands with Larry out of long-standing habit.)
- Masks were available for everyone and all were encouraged to wear them in the building. (they experienced varying levels of success with this one.)
- Everyone entering the building had their temperature checked before they were allowed to enter.
- There was singing (with masks on) so it was more of a “joyful noise” 😊 (Susan noted that singing projects particles farther and faster than normal speaking does, so this is something to remember when considering in-person church services.)

Lyle Miller, Everence, joined the meeting. He shared a story of how the Everence/MDS/MCC funded grant program has helped a congregation contemplating closing down to remain open and viable for this time to continue its ministry in their area. He asked how offerings are holding up now. A show of hands revealed a mix of good, holding steady and declining income experienced by congregations.

A second show of hands revealed the quite a number of churches have applied for and been granted loans through the Payroll Protection Program.

- **David Nickel, First, Lincoln, NE** – their church had a good conversation about if to apply and then how to disperse the funds received. At this time, they have chosen to disperse most of the funds through their sharing fund. People from the church are letting the sharing fund know of people outside the church family who are in need of financial assistance. He said there were people in the church with reservations about applying for or accepting this money from the government, and these people have said they will donate their \$1,200 stimulus check to the church sharing fund to help others, once these original funds have been dispersed.
- **Galen Kauffman, Bethel, MN** - Their church applied on the first day applications were accepted. There was a little bit of push-back on making the application. Some folks feared there were strings attached or because of the Mennonite stance of separation from the state.

Ramiro Hernandez – Iglesia Menonita Jesus El Buen Pastor – The money Martha’s church received from the Everence fund was *very* helpful for their congregation; he offered thanks for it to Everence rep, Lyle Miller.

Lyle reminded pastors that the Everence sharing fund is currently operating under somewhat relaxed rules for accessing the funds, so if congregations know of needs, they should not hesitate to apply for these funds.

How have people been affected by the virus and how are you dealing with these effects? How are you staying in touch with your communities?

David Heusinkveld, West Union – shared that an elder in the congregation contracted the virus, but had come thru it well, however, this has shaken him and the congregation. David shared that

he is feeling a high level of disconnect and isolation. Being physically distant is making it very hard to connect to the people in his congregation.

Nick Detweiler-Stoddard, Salem, Freeman, SD – Sunday school classes have been meeting on their own, via Zoom, so they can have another layer of connectivity. Even committee meetings (via Zoom or in socially distant in-person settings) are well attended because people are craving the connection. The sharing time of their Zoom Sunday morning worship is increasing in importance. The deacons of the church meet weekly and make phone calls throughout the week. Still, he believes that the church is losing contact with some folks.

David Nickel, First, Lincoln, NE – participated in a Zoom call with the mayor governor and 90 pastors. The meeting was about re-opening church services to in-person gatherings.

Ramiro Hernandez – Iglesia Menonita Jesus El Buen Pastor – is feeling isolated from his congregation. He is fielding questions on how the congregations is going to celebrate Mother's Day. He said families will celebrate together, which is good. They are training their congregants on how to use Zoom and other platforms. Before the virus, they met twice weekly for Bible study. Now, they are meeting virtually 3-4 times/week. For those who don't have electronic means, he phones them to talk and pray with people.

Galen Kauffman, Bethel, MN – asked if others are noticing increased levels of anxiety amongst congregants. (he noted that he had heard of conspiracy theories, new world order theories, etc.)

Susan noted that there are lots of factors that play into the anxiety level any individual may be experiencing. She advised everyone to get their information from reliable sources and to be careful where they seek out information. And she reminded us that our grounding is in Jesus Christ. Our foundation is sure in him. She ended the meeting with prayer.