

CPMC Conference Ministers and Congregational Pastors

Wednesday, May 13, 2020

Susan Janzen opened the meeting with a prayer.

How has the past week been for pastors? A few gave the “thumbs up”. A few gave the “thumbs down”. Most experienced an “average” or “so-so” week.

- Suzanne Ford, Zion MC - They are moving toward beginning church services outdoors in June. They will practice social distancing, everyone will wear a mask, there will be hand sanitizer available, everyone will bring their own lawn chairs to sit in. Figuring out all the details and not knowing how well this will work is stressful.
- Karen Martens Zimmerly, First, Iowa City – There are guidelines for reopening, but the numbers of new infections are still high. She has been watching the world coverage of how re-openings are going and noted that in most countries they are allowing only small groups to gather, not anything like would attend a church service at First MC. Added to that, their church has a large proportion of health care workers and elderly people, so she is uneasy with reopening too soon. It just feels too risky, as the pandemic is not yet in hand.

Joel Beachy, East Union MC – Asked how other churches are tracking contacts made with congregants. What programs/databases are other congregations using?

- “paper and pencil” 😊
- WORD doc
- Suzanne Ford, Zion MC – uses EXCEL which works well but doesn’t print well.
- Terry Martens Zimmerly, First, Iowa City – they use Google Docs on Google Drive for shared information of contacts and visits made by pastors and Deacons/Elders
- Seth Miller, Bethesda – their church uses Servant Keeper

The question of “When and how do we reopen?” was put forward by Susan. She shared talking points from an article published by the American Baptists which has been posted on the CPMC website. The article asks, “As Churches Consider Reopening Buildings and Resuming In-Person Worship, What Can Pastors Expect?”

1. *Realize that everyone (including you as the pastor) has been traumatized.* Emotions include grief for a variety of reasons. We are all different and process this experience differently.
2. *People are unpredictable.* Those who seem very stable may react very emotionally. Those who you thought were fragile may exhibit great resilience. Be prepared to make referrals for those who are responding outside normal behavioral boundaries. Try to be the “least anxious presence in the room.”
3. *Be prepared to meet resistance (in spite of your own personal fatigue).* Realize that some people will disagree with the decisions made, regardless of the decision. Be ready to stand firm in decisions made for the health and safety of the congregation. Be aware that decisions may/will be politicized.

4. *Be prepared for people to act irrationally.* Some people will lash out at the pastor. This may be a result of the fact that they trust you with their emotions. They may be mad at God, but take it out on the pastor. No one knows how to perfectly respond and be a pastor in a pandemic. Give grace to yourself and your congregants.
5. *Don't take everything personally.* It's not all about you. Be a calming presence when others are "vibrating with emotion". Don't validate inappropriate behavior, but do validate the emotions behind the behavior.
6. *Take care of yourself!!* Take time off or take vacation days. Keep up collegial relationships. Maintain your spiritual walk. Show yourselves grace. Self-care is vital to have the capacity to care for others.

Susan said she wished she could mandate that clergy take two or three days off in a row before the end of May to do self-care, rest, and reflection on their own experience of living and working through a pandemic. Alas, our polity does not give her that authority! So, she strongly encouraged all pastors to take some time off to tend to their own needs during this time. She then invited pastors to share what they have been doing for their own self-care.

- Joel Beachy, East Union MC – Golfing (allows for social distancing while being out in nature and getting exercise.)
- Michael Swartzendruber, Wayland, MC – will be participating in a monastic-style multi-day retreat at Crooked Creek Christian Camp
- David Heusinkveld, West Union MC – has been walking and gardening
- Taric Leichty – Bellwood MC – has been biking or walking with his wife (when it's not raining)
- Corey Miller, Salem Zion MC - has been doing farm work on the tractor and is looking forward to gardening.

Susan Janzen and Lewis Miller shared a concern from the pastor of the Omaha Chin Christian Church regarding a family in the church. The pastor there is expecting to perform a graveside service (for family only) for a church member with blood clots in the brain.

Lyle Miller, Everence - shared that the funds set up by Everence, MDS, and MCC for congregational grants have been entirely dispersed to about 300 congregations nation-wide. Several congregations in CPMC were awarded grants from this fund.

Pastors were given the opportunity to join in small ZOOM Rooms for sharing and prayer before adjourning.