

Clergy Conversations: Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi

April 6, 2020

The following information and insights were shared by Bishop Cynthia.

Opening Comments: responding to questions being heard around the Conference

- 1) Appointments are still being made during this time. Most full-time appointments will be in place by Easter. Take-ins have been conducted by Zoom or conference calls. Notification of appointment changes have been shared with congregations through e-mail or snail mail.
- 2) July 1, 2020 will still be the start date for new appointments. Pastors are encouraged to contact movers to get on a waiting list. District Superintendents will be helping to coordinate moves this season. In a worst case scenario, some pastors may have to commute to their new appointment if they have not moved yet.
- 3) The Western PA Conference has been on an essential spending only mandate for several weeks now. Essential spending includes salaries, necessary building repairs, and grants that are essential to existing ministries. The Conference is trying to be prudent and wise. The Board of Pensions is providing 2 months of relief for churches who pay healthcare/pension for their pastors. Bishop encourages churches to continue to pay apportionments.
- 4) Churches are encouraged to continue paying their pastors. Pastors should NOT forego receiving a salary because it creates complications with the IRS and receiving any potential relief from the recently passed stimulus package. If pastors continue to take their salary, they can make the decision to give it back to the church as an offering.
- 5) Invite people to be generous in their giving! This is an opportunity for people to respond to needs in meaningful ways. Aging members on a fixed income are a strength! They are still getting paid whereas others have become unemployed.

Matters of Theology and Ministry

- 1) "Social Distancing" is difficult for clergy because it goes against pastoral instincts. The Bishop affirms the wonderful, creative ways clergy are continuing to do ministry during this time. We are re-defining church!
- 2) "Virtual Communion" should not be practiced – it is counter to our United Methodist theology and guidelines. The Northeast Jurisdiction College of Bishops had a conversation and agreed to uphold the United Methodist understanding of Holy Communion. Physical gathering and physical elements are important in the sacrament of Holy Communion.
- 3) However, in times when life is threatened, we can forego some of our theological understandings. Exceptions still apply. (Example: baptizing an infant or child who is not expected to live without pre-baptismal counseling.) Clergy on the front lines need to make appropriate decisions for their communities. Questions still need to be asked: How does this fit into our United Methodist theology? Will a decision cause harm or get the congregation in trouble with local officials?

Closing Thoughts and Words of Encouragement

- 1) The 2020 WPAUMC Annual Conference has been postponed. Please keep in touch with your District Superintendent about more details.
- 2) General Conference will take place in the 4th quarter of 2021. Jurisdictional Conference will be held following General Conference. As details become available, they will be shared.
- 3) Bishop encourages the clergy to care for themselves in the midst of this pandemic. This is an exhausting time so clergy need to take time to rest even more than usual. When everything is new and difficult, making novel decisions can wear you out. Be sure to rest!
- 4) Bishop is worried about the safety of family and friends, clergy and laity. This is a traumatic time as we are up against an invisible enemy, such as we have never seen before in our lifetime. We need to care for each other.
- 5) While this experience is new for us, God has seen this before – and God is with us! God does some of God’s best work during seasons of trauma. With the Holy Spirit, we have an opportunity to work alongside God, to re-examine and re-imagine everything. God will supply us with everything we need.
- 6) Western Pennsylvanians are not only survivors, but thrivers! We have experienced trauma before (disasters, devastating economy, etc.) – we have more than survived – we thrived! God will continue to use us during this difficult season.
- 7) Social distancing does not equal spiritual distancing! This is a time to hold together, to be held by God, and to live as the Body of Christ!
- 8) We WILL get through this together – and we WILL be stronger!

Question and Answer Time with Bishop Cynthia

Question: With Jurisdictional Conference postponed, what does it mean for election of Bishops and assignment of Bishops?

Bishop: The NEJ College of Bishops have asked the Council of Bishops to consider having all Bishops remain in their current setting until Jurisdictional Conference is held. Unless the retirement of a Bishop is mandatory, Bishops cannot retire until Jurisdictional Conference is held. This would mean all Bishops in the NEJ would stay in place until the Jurisdictional Conference is held.

Question: Are pastoral evaluations and other regular forms still due?

Bishop: Grace abounds! Yet, evaluations should not be a “moment in time,” but an ongoing process with Pastor Parish Relations Committees. Evaluations should not be a last minute process – but grace abounds!

Question: If social distancing extends beyond April, what safety nets does the Conference have in place if some of the smaller churches are can no longer afford to stay operational in regards to bills and salary?

Bishop: Roger White, Conference Treasurer, and Amy Bentz, Conference Co-Chancellor, have been researching the 800 pages of the law that was just passed (stimulus package). They believe that

churches would be eligible to apply for relief. This information continues to be shared with the Conference as it becomes confirmed.

Question: If there is a financial crunch in the church, could we use on an emergency basis designated funds from the sale of the parsonage to keep the church finances solvent?

Bishop: The Book of Discipline provides a pathway for that process. Clergy need to have conversation with the District Superintendent about how to enact that process. If there are restricted funds, a more complicated process needs to be followed. If the Church Council or Trustees set the restrictions, they can change the restrictions. If a donor or other body set the restrictions, would need to follow a legal process to change designation.

The following ideas/needs were shared in Breakout Sessions:

Resources needed to help churches make good financial decisions and practice healthy stewardship

- ~ Continued support and updates from the Conference Finance Department
- ~ Continued DS calls with District pastors
- ~ Share information about online giving: especially safe & simple ways for older members to use
- ~ Set up a “how-to” tutorial for online giving
- ~ Communicate directly with Lay Leaders: online calls/webinars specifically for laity
- ~ Information about various platforms to keep churches connected
- ~ Keep posting information on the Conference website
- ~ Guidance on how to prepare for future disasters and/or pandemics

Other ideas from Breakout Session #1:

- ~ Encourage members to have their bank set up bill pay to the church to send their offerings
- ~ Drive-Thru Offering at a designated time on a Sunday: locked box to put offering in
- ~ During online worship services, telling “visitors” to contribute to their own church if they have one; if they do not have a church, stressing that there is not an obligation to send in an offering

What criteria are clergy using to make decisions during this season of Social Distancing?

- Consulting with colleagues
- Remaining flexible in changing situations
- Balancing “pastoral heart” and government guidelines for social distancing
- Listening to public health authorities (local and CDC)
- Listening to God and not our own instincts
- Prayerfully using common sense as we practice good theology and doctrine
- Stay informed and communicate with church leadership
- Depend on the church leadership, even those not in “elected” roles
- Keeping congregation informed about decisions