Bishop's Message: Weathering These Uncertain Times

By Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi

As the number of people infected by the coronavirus and the related deaths increase, I continue to encourage you to pray for those who have been infected and affected by the virus, the many health care providers whose lives are jeopardized, and our elected officials who hour by hour are making decisions that impact the safety of our communities and our nation. We need prayers of healing, wisdom, comfort, creativity, obedience, compassion, flexibility, and anything else for which the Spirit leads you to pray.

If you have not already done so, please review my statements and video on the Conference website, wpaumc.org. I apologize for the roughness of the video, but I made it at home so I did not have my usual production crew of Tina Wilson, Jackie Campbell, and Bill Jacka to help me. During this season we are all learning how to use technology and develop new skills.

Last week the Appointive and Coordinating Cabinet held our meetings via ZOOM. Because he is the Cabinet Secretary, Rev. Jim Pond was the ZOOM host. He had never done this before and he did a fabulous job. Rev. Brad Lauster led the Appointive Cabinet in ZOOM worship and Roger White led the Coordinating Cabinet in a devotional via ZOOM. God was glorified and community was built as Brad and Roger showed their flexibility by adjusting their presentations for our technology. Our Dean, Rev. Pat Lenox, chaired the ZOOM meetings, I believe for the first time, and also did a tremendous job. Rev. Alyce Weaver-Dunn has participated and chaired a number of ZOOM meetings, so she was the pro on the call as she led us through the Coordinating Cabinet’s strategic plan.

We are trying to be flexible and supportive of one another and you during this season. So please continue to pray for your Cabinet, Conference staff, our pastors, and laity in leadership positions as we help you navigate these uncharted waters.

I hope you are aware that General Conference has been postponed. We also do not know how the postponement will impact Jurisdictional Conference.

Here are seven daily activities to help you weather these uncertain times:

• Spend as much time reading scripture and praying as you do watching and reading news about the virus
• Call someone you know is alone at home or in a nursing facility and take a few moments just to listen to them
• Put on some praise music or hymns and have your own devotional time
• Wash your hands or use hand sanitizer every time you get into your car to go to the grocery store or help your church distribute food
• Twice a day take a walk around the block, down the road, or down to the mailbox
• Don’t join in the blame game that has become so much a part of our culture
• Offer to virtually babysit for a family that now has several children at home
• Set a time to FaceTime the children, have a video tea party, play video games with them through online gaming, or watch a movie at the same time.
The Church Has Just Left the Building!

By Rev. Alyce Weaver Dunn, Director of Connectional Ministries

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

-Matthew 28:16-20 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus said to the disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Yet here we are in 2020 and the new mandate is this: “Stay home! Don’t go into the world! Practice social distancing!” Of course these are necessary mandates in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. These new mandates are life-saving and of crucial importance at this moment in time.

So, how can we be the Church when we hold these two very different mandates in tension? Go into the world! Stay at home! How can we be the church when our buildings have limited access, when the doors are closed for gatherings, when we cannot come together to worship?

In these past few days, I have been praying over these thoughts. And here is my conclusion: While we are in challenging times, we also have a tremendous opportunity to regain our focus in ministry.

Now why do I say that? For too long the mantra of the Church has been “Come to us.” We’re here – the doors are open – come. The hidden message in what appears like welcoming words is that the burden is placed on the other, the visitor, the outsider. The burden is not placed on the Church – the clergy and the laity – we only have to stay and expect others to come to us. We invest a lot of time and resources – in a faithful, Christ centered way, of course – in doing ministry that expects the world to come to us...and then we wonder why the pews are empty, why people are not coming?

Maybe people have not come to us because we have been called to go to them. Jesus did not say, “Come...” Jesus said, “Go...” John Wesley did not say “the church building is my parish.” He said, “The world is my parish.”

So, maybe this time of no gathering in our church buildings is a call to recover our original charter – to go back into the world. Perhaps, this is our moment to truly be the Church without walls that divide and keep others out; to make connecting with people for the sake of sharing Christ be more important than preserving brick and mortar; to allow the making of disciples of Jesus Christ to be our focus rather than maintaining decorum and tradition. Maybe this is the moment to be the Church again as Christ has called us to be! For the Church to go rather than expect people to come to us!

But how do we go back into the world right now when we are in the midst of a pandemic? How can we recover our roots when we are instructed to have limited contact with other people, to not gather in groups greater than 10, to stay at home if at all possible? How can we be the Church right now when we can’t go and people can’t even come?

Here are some thoughts paired with creative ways our churches are being the church outside of its four walls.

Pick up the phone and actually talk to people one to one! In recent years, many people (including me!) have found it easier to text or email rather than to talk to someone on the phone. We have actually embraced “social distancing” already in the way we prefer to communicate with each other! In our current physical isolation, we can call people, not only church members, but neighbors and co-workers and family and friends – all people who need a word of hope and encouragement right now.

While video conference calls have become the new normal, internet is not always an available tool for many rural congregations. Pastors in our Conference are reaching out to the members of their congregations over the phone to offer support, prayer and conversation.

For some, mail has been their main form of communication. One pastor commented, “Half of my people have NO technology, no email and no text. For those, I am mailing a sermonette type devotion, as well as a call to pray at 11 everyday.” For Sunday worship, she further explained, she is mailing out packets that include a plan for self guided worship for this week and a copy of her sermon manuscript.
My hope is that in our current isolation, we will become more aware of each other and the need for community. When we do not have something we need, we can begin to dream about a new and improved version when it is ours again.

Maybe churches and its members (especially the clergy!) will move past the isolation of self-preservation and begin to place more value on being part of the community in which they exist. Maybe we will start to see how limiting it is to only have ministry take place within four walls. Maybe (I hope you are sitting down...if not, find the nearest chair), we can even move beyond our differences (political, theological, cultural, racial, etc.), and rediscover our common purpose in Christ’s call to go into all the world so that people can know the transforming power of God’s love! Maybe God will use this difficult moment in history to call us back to truly being the Church again! Maybe when we are released back to “normalcy,” we can say with authenticity, “The Church has just left the building!”

Though we are apart, please know that I am praying for each of you. I can see each of you in my mind’s eye – and that brings me great joy.

May God connect us through his Spirit as we are apart – and may God reignite our shared ministry as we one day come back together!

Many churches are streaming live or recorded services to reach their congregations, some for the very first time. Matthew Rendulic, Associate Pastor of the Heartland Crossroads Cooperative Parish Charge, shared in an online post, “Our Co-op is made up of six very rural churches in NW PA. Our first online service (recorded and posted on YouTube, then shared from our webpage and various social media platforms) had 612 unique views. Our six churches probably average less than 200 in attendance all together. We’re engaging with more folk in the quarantine than we do in our weekly services.”

Some churches are getting together to broadcast joint services. In the DuBois area, pastors from DuBois First UMC, Mt. Zion UMC, Lakeside UMC and the Luthersburg Charge live streamed a joint service from Lakeside. In an article from the Courier Express, Pastor Brett Dinger said, “With technology, we don’t have to cancel the church because we can have church wherever we are.”

On March 22, Grace UMC in Indiana, PA broadcast an evening service in partnership with a local radio station. Pastor Bill Blair delivered the message from a church balcony overlooking the lot where members of the congregation were parked. Will Pinos, the contemporary worship leader and tech director, said, “It went very well and it will continue. We got great feedback on how people were still able to be together in the safety of their vehicles.”

Find ways to connect community members who need hope right now. We keep food pantries and backpack ministries open (following guidelines to keep ourselves and others safe!). We offer to help older or vulnerable neighbors with having basic needs fulfilled. We create prayer ministries that are not dependent on membership but open to all who need the comfort of having someone pray for them. We place signs and symbols of hope in our church yards to bolster peoples’ spirits. We keep our hearts open to the movement of the Holy Spirit as we discover ways to connect with people in ways we never dreamed of before!

To assist people in the Sharpsburg community who are facing loss of income, Roots of Faith handed out over 100 bags of non-perishable items. Due to a high need, volunteers have worked to quadruple the number of food boxes. Boxes are delivered to vulnerable people who cannot leave the house.

Lance Tucker, pastor of Oakland UMC, has transformed his food-truck business into a soup ministry. In a story, The Derrick newspaper quotes his wife Amy Tucker, who says that more than 15 members of the church have become part of the operation, with a number of the volunteers delivering soup. In a Facebook post, Tucker shared a picture and commented, "Served over 170. God is good and we give Him all the glory."
Connectional Ministry Amid COVID-19 Challenges

By Rev. Alyce Weaver Dunn, Director of Connectional Ministries

How quickly life can change! On March 16, 2020, based on increasing restrictions issued by health and government officials to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus, Conference Staff were notified by email that the Conference Center would not host any meetings and gatherings. Staff members, were encouraged to work from home and they immediately began to work on the details to enable that.

The Program Staff had a meeting scheduled for the next morning – and met via the online Zoom platform to brainstorm how to resource the Western PA pastors and congregations during these anxious times. Although “we’ve never done it this way before,” the staff created several new opportunities for receiving and sharing information about how to be the church during this time of “social distancing.”

The following opportunities were established:

The Conference website (www.wpaumc.org) now has WPA COVID-19 Announcements on the main page. This is a place to receive updated information about the crisis and the church’s response to it. Included on the announcement page is a link to our list of Online Worship Services and a link to the WPAUMC Facebook list of Covid-19 Church Planning Resources.

The Conference Facebook page can be accessed at facebook.com/wpaumc. On the Facebook page is a link to “Covid-19: Church Planning Resources” (also linked on the WPA website). Also, a new clergy group was created on Facebook to provide a space for pastors to share resources, seek input from others, and have support during this crisis. If clergy want to join the group, they can request to join by clicking on the link on the WPA Facebook page.

The Program Staff scheduled information meetings via Zoom for pastors every Monday and Wednesday from 10-11:15 A.M. Each session features a different topic such as Discipleship or Finance, with staff members sharing information on how to continue ministry in the current circumstances. There is also time for clergy to ask questions and share ideas. Clergy serving in local churches were invited to each session by email sent one or two days before with a link to register. Registration was to 100 per session to provide a quality experience for participants. If demand is high, some sessions may be offered more than once.

In addition to the above opportunities, each of the Program Staff continues to be available for consultation in their particular area of ministry. For example, Amanda Gilligan, Coordinator of Young People’s Ministry provides online discussions for youth and youth leaders. Rev. Dr. Susan Moudry, Coordinator of Clergy and Lay Excellence, is sharing a blog on the Conference website about Leadership during difficult times. (wpaumc.org/blogs)

These are just a few examples about how our staff has stepped up and out in new ways, even while working from home! Please contact staff members via email and they will respond to you.

As the Director of Connectional Ministries, I am extremely proud of the Conference Program Staff as they work with dedication and intensity. There is no textbook to help us through this time. Please pray for us and offer grace as we continue to provide resources and support for the clergy and laity of the WPA Conference! May God bless you abundantly and fill you with strength and hope during these unprecedented times!

Ritchey Named Washington District Superintendent

Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi will appoint the Rev. Paul Ritchey, currently serving as pastor of First UMC in Punxsutawney, as the Superintendent of the Washington District, effective July 1. The current superintendent, Rev. Brad Lauster, is retiring.

“Rev. Ritchey came to pastoral ministry as a second career, bringing a background in business administration and customer service,” the Bishop said. “He will bring to the superintendency his strong human resources skill set. Rev. Ritchey will also bring with him experience in a variety of church settings - rural, suburban, and urban. As such, he is well suited to help the Washington District continue its work on embracing and seeking blessing from its theological, economic, racial, and cultural diversity.”

In all of his pastoral appointments, Rev. Ritchey has demonstrated effective pastoral leadership, Bishop Moore-Koikoi said. He has particularly distinguished himself as a teacher and mentor to pastors. He has been involved in Clergy Communities of Practice (small groups of clergy who gather for mutual accountability and learning), District Committee on Ministry, and the Board of Ordained Ministry.

“Rev. Ritchey also has led by fostering and enabling effective lay leadership,” she said. “He is known for his servant leadership style as he seeks to facilitate, rather than direct, effective outreach and discipleship ministry. Because he understands the dynamics of our United Methodist heritage and the importance of the role of the laity, he encourages lay-driven ministry.”

Ritchey’s personal mission statement is “to get to heaven and take as many people with me as I can.” He has a passion for helping disciples overcome apathy about their faith. He also has a passion for working “with” the community to develop outreach ministries based on needs that the community has identified.

“Rev. Ritchey brings a wealth of gifts and a Spirit-filled presence to the cabinet table. Our annual conference will continue to be blessed as he serves in this new role,” the Bishop said.
Lessons in Leadership: Adaptability

By Rev. Dr. Susan Moudry, Coordinator of Clergy and Lay Excellence

Those of you familiar with best practices in leadership know this buzz word well: “adaptability.” For years now, leadership experts have hailed it as a necessary quality, present in strong leaders. Tod Bolsinger even wrote a popular book, Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Unchartered Territory, exploring the idea of adaptable leadership. Bolsinger uses Lewis’ and Clark’s famous expedition as a metaphor for church leadership today, showing how they had to leave their canoes behind as the terrain very literally changed before their eyes unexpectedly. Sound familiar?

Over the coming weeks, I plan to offer you leadership tips through posts on the Conference Reflections blog. (Find it at wpaumc.org/blogs.) I’ll provide articles and videos that may be of interest as you seek to strengthen your leadership in these strange times. I hope you’ll follow along and offer feedback.

You see, the truth is any of us can be adaptable and even learn to thrive in this new atmosphere. “How,” you ask? By knowing your mission and leading from it, both personally and corporately. So often we are wed to our methods, but the need for social distancing and orders to stay-at-home bring an excellent opportunity to forget the methods and focus solely on the mission. The task of adaptable leadership is the task of being wed only to the mission and realizing the methods mean very little. You don’t have to keep doing all the things you were doing, or find new ways to recreate all those things. Let me repeat that: you don’t have to keep doing all the things you were doing. You do need to figure out what things matter today to advancing your church’s mission and work on those. Those things may have changed in the last week and a half.

We have been forced into a season where we have no choice but to be adaptable. It’s required of our leadership. Still, the best advice I can give you in this season is to know who you are and lead from there. This is an amazing opportunity, if only you’ll allow it to be, to examine everything you do and ask hard questions about how this fits in with who you are as a church (or an individual). Make the needed changes and then remember: it might all change tomorrow, or next week. It’s okay. Things are changing even as I write this blog. Maybe it’s a good reminder that the only thing that ever really mattered was our call to be the church, making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

So today, just stop. Put everything down. Move away from all the digital devices that can distract you (even that watch you’re wearing). For at least 5 minutes I invite you to pray. Listen. Be still. Acknowledge your own anxiety, fear and even excitement. And breathe. The world will keep turning. God is in control. You can’t fix everything, nor should you. Together we will adapt and collectively find a new way of being.

After that, go, remembering the words of Ephesians 3:20: God is able to do far more than we ever ask or imagine.

Credit Union Rebrands to Broaden Financial Ministry

Initially formed in 1953 to help pastors secure loans they would otherwise be unable to obtain, the Keystone United Methodist Federal Credit Union has grown to offer online banking, mobile banking, IRAs, online bill pay, electronic statements, and many other services.

The credit union not only serves the financial needs of United Methodist clergy, but services are available to all United Methodists and their family members, UM churches, and related organizations in the Western Pennsylvania Conference.

Now, to offer its financial ministry to others with common Wesleyan roots, the Credit Union has changed its name to CommonRoots Credit Union. Visit www.keystoneumfcu.org to learn more.
A Story to Share: A City of Contrasts

By Donna Vizza, WPAUMC Connectional Leadership Table, United Methodist General Board of Church and Society

Berlin is a city of contrasts. Some streets you travel are modern with beautiful architecture, parks, and statues. Others are lined with obviously post-WWII buildings, spare and squat, with little character. Still others look to be straight out of fairy tales, with stucco and half-timber framing. Some buildings set on curving roads that look to be not quite wide enough for cars. Shops and restaurants vary with the neighborhoods.

Parts of the Berlin wall still exists, not shutting anyone out or in, but serving as a reminder of human inhumanity to humans. The 18th century Brandenburg Gate has become a symbol of reunification, as people can pass through with no delays. Our trip to visit the wall ended with a service in the Chapel of Reconciliation, built after the war from the rubble remaining from a Presbyterian church that had been torn down to give Nazi guards a clear view. Soil from every country where people were killed by the Nazis was used to make the mortar to hold the rocks in place.

Sunday morning we attended church services in various neighborhoods. I went to a small United Methodist church which shared space, time, and services with a Lutheran congregation. The two groups take turns with their pastors, hymnals and liturgy. To include us, the bulletin was printed in German and English, and we sang and responded in our native languages. Once again, ecumenism can provide unity and strength to God’s people. The people were very welcoming to us and asked many questions after the service. When I was asked if such combinations happen in Western PA, I had to answer that in my little corner of God’s green acres, we have United Methodist churches that can’t bring themselves to worship together, even to save their money and congregations.

That afternoon we went to the Arab section of Berlin. This is a thriving neighborhood of immigrants who have made it to Berlin. The German policy for immigrants at that time was 3-part. Immigrants had three years to learn the German language proficiently, find a place to live, and obtain gainful employment. Once these criteria were met, they could apply to become citizens.

During the three years, they were housed in dormitory style buildings, with a small bed and space, and provided with food and 130 Euros a month, enough for personal needs.

We were divided into groups and given a tour through this section of Berlin. Our leader was a very personable, well-spoken young man from Syria. As he led us on our walk, he asked us to figure out what his war was, what his profession had been in Damascus, and why he had originally planned on going to London. As we walked and talked, the words, “The pen is mightier than the sword” were given to me and popped into my brain. At the end of our tour, he took us up to the rooftop of a building and asked each one of us what our answers were. When it was my turn, I said that I thought that he had been a journalist in Syria and had escaped when telling the truth would have gotten him beheaded. I said that I thought he wanted to go to London to become part of the BBC. He then told us his story.

He was a young reporter for an on-air news show in Damascus when he was told that he would need to follow the line that Assad had put out or that he and his family would be taken. He replied that he couldn’t lie; he had made a promise to God that he would tell the truth. A couple of weeks later, his boss told him that “they” were coming to get him and he must leave immediately. He went to his family, and they pooled their resources to get him passage out of Syria and into Europe. He told us of the buses that are double-booked and boats that sank because of overloading caused by greedy people. He told us about European countries that try to detain people from their intended destination to get the money provided by the UN to support immigrants. Our young man ran out of money in Germany; he was luckier than most. He never made it to the BBC, but he was currently working a morning show in Berlin.

Because our young man had achieved the three criteria, he was now eligible to bring over his wife and family. He told us of a mountain outside Damascus that he would climb to sit on the top with the whole area spread out below. He described the sunsets, and the calm he felt when he sat there. He told us that there were no mountains in Berlin where he could climb and reflect, so he found this rooftop and made it his place of reflection. What he said next was both inspiring and heartbreaking. He said that even though he had achieved a good life in Germany, “I will be the first person back in Syria when the Assad regime is removed.”

The lesson I learned on this trip was that human inhumanity to humans is past, present, and likely to continue into the future. This is not what God wants for or from us. In Exodus 23: 9 we are told, “Do not oppress an immigrant. You know what it’s like to be an immigrant, because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt.” And it’s not enough to just do no harm, we are to do as much good for others as we can. In James 2: 17 we hear, “In the same way, faith is dead when it doesn’t result in faithful activity.”
Financial Focus: Budget Checkups

By the Council on Finance & Administration

Routine checkups are something we have become quite accustomed to as part of life. We visit our doctors, we make sure that our vehicles receive routine maintenance, and we ensure that the HVAC systems on our church buildings are working and that the landscaping is well maintained. We are intentional about performing checkups in so many aspects of our lives, but when it comes to our local church budgets we sometimes lapse into a hands-off mentality. Not only is this a dangerous way to approach your church’s budget, it is also not in keeping with the spiritual practice of financial stewardship that we individually strive to attain, and that we encourage from our congregations.

The month of April, it is a good time to review what happened during the first quarter of the year and discuss how you can make adjustments to foster positive results in the months to come. There are some basic questions your local church finance committee can ask as it comes together -- virtually or in person -- for your next meeting:

To date, how does your income compare to your expenditures? How do they compare to last year’s figures, both in dollar amount and in giving units? At this point in the year, have you made any of your Connectional Apportionment payments? If so, thank you! If not, how can you move toward making your first one, and develop plans for recurring payments in the future? Did any of your first quarter events go over budget? If so, why? If so, are there areas of your budget that are able to cover the overage? It not, how will you adjust future spending to compensate? Given current global realities and the potential for a decline in giving, how can you encourage your committees to be intentional in limiting unnecessary spending?

This is just a sample of questions that will help you gauge your financial realities as we enter the second quarter of 2020. In these times of uncertainty, it is even more important than ever to actively manage and perfect your church’s budget and spending patterns. It is also vital that you provide financial transparency for your congregation and challenge them to rise, as United Methodists do, to this new challenge that we face. If you have questions on how to make adjustments moving forward to maximize your financial potential, the Conference Finance Team is ready, willing, and able to help you succeed. The Western Pennsylvania United Methodist Foundation is also available to provide assistance! Maintain control of your finances now so that you are well-positioned for the future.

Team Participates in Poverty Simulation

In early May, our Western PA Conference Poverty team sent four United Methodists to a “Community Action Poverty Simulation” (CAPS) conducted by the Missouri Community Action Network. CAPS is “an interactive, immersive experience that gives participants a glimpse into the structural barriers facing individuals living on low-income.”

On the first day of the simulation, participants divided into family units and role-played the lives of low-income families. As the simulation progressed, additional circumstances mimicking real issues were presented to the families. For example, $10 would be needed for a class field trip or a utility had been shut off for nonpayment. The family had to attempt to balance these roadblocks without going into debt. Often, budgets for food and other necessities would be cut to manage the emergency situations.

Sandra Matoushaya, Missional Engagement Coordinator, describes the situation she was presented with: “As an 18 year old in community college, I found myself struggling to care for my siblings. My mother was no longer around and my father had been incarcerated. It was frustrating knowing how little time I had to dedicate to my siblings. Unhelpful community resource personnel elevated my frustration. As the days progressed in the simulation, I became increasingly anxious on my commute home because I was afraid of what I would find waiting for me.”

Sandra’s family managed to stay together and have resources left at the end of the simulation, but many others did not.

Day 2 of the training focused on teaching participants how to plan and facilitate a Poverty Simulation in their own communities. “I personally feel everyone should participate in this simulation,” Sandra said. “Not only does it open our eyes to what many people in our country and communities face, but it can help us be in relationship differently. We need to be mindful of how we treat our brothers and sisters and be deliberate in our ministry together.”

One of our Conference’s Five Areas of Focus calls us to be in ministry with the poor and marginalized. Our emphasis is on “with” – standing with those who are regarded as “the least of these,” listening to them, understanding their needs and aspirations, and working with them to achieve their goals. It also means addressing the causes of poverty and responding in ways that lift up individuals and communities. United Methodists believe working side by side with those striving to improve their situation is more effective long term than top-down charity. The team hopes to schedule simulations in Western PA later this year.
to keep up with what's happening in our conference, visit our website at www.wpaumc.org. use the links under connect with us to find our facebook page, photos and videos or subscribe to our e-newsletters.