Bishop's Message: Count Your Blessings

By Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi

During times like these, the words of Psalm 34 come to mind. And I hear congregations from my childhood singing the hymn, Count Your Blessings.

When upon life’s billows you are tempest tossed,
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.

Are you ever burdened with a load of care?
Does the cross seem heavy you are called to bear?
Count your many blessings, every doubt will fly,
And you will be singing as the days go by.

Count your blessings, name them one by one;
Count your blessings, see what God hath done.

I asked our District Superintendents to help me count our many blessings. They’ve observed a number of things happening that are worthy of praise.

Many churches are seeing extended outreach, increased engagement and increased financial support. During a recent clergy Zoom meeting, Pastor Gary Hilton, serving New Brighton UMC, celebrated that giving in his church has actually increased in this season of shelter-in-place. Pastors from several other churches report extravagant generosity and increases in giving during this time. The faithful giving by members allows churches to continue vital ministry to their community.

Quite a few churches and pastors are using technology they’ve never used before to reach out to their congregations and the community. Congregations small and large, rural and urban have embraced online worship as a way to stay connected. Pastors are posting devotions, Bible Studies, and encouraging words on Facebook daily or weekly. Telecommunications are making some parishioners feel more connected to their local church than ever. Rev. Jude Urso of Elrama/Monongahela First Charge offers daily devotionals from his back porch, while Pastor Lanfer Simpson of Mapletown UMC offered a Facebook Live sunrise service with birds chirping in the background.

Other churches have embraced the use of drive-in services. Jennerstown UMC, served by Rev. Chuck Hildbold, has offered drive-in worship service and broadcasting on radio and livestream.

On the next few pages you'll see a list of some of the many God sightings they have seen since this pandemic hit Western Pennsylvania. I hope as you read through it, you will help me magnify the Lord and exalt God’s Holy Name.

I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth, My soul makes its boast in the Lord; Let the humble hear and be glad. Oh magnify the Lord with me, And let us exalt His name together. -Psalm 34: 1-3
Butler District

- Pastor Jan Davis of Beaver Falls Central UMC has partnered with a local radio station to broadcast her Gospel proclamation weekly to the community and beyond.
- Pastor Mark Ongley of Ashes to Life UMC, where the majority of parishioners are on the journey of addiction recovery, has created a network of virtual support groups and prayer gatherings for those in recovery.
- Caroline Coulter, director of children's ministry at Butler First UMC, has organized a variety of giveaways and online activities for the children of the church and community.

"My family and I had fallen out of the habit of praying together beyond a quick blessing over our meals. But, over the last month, we spend at least a half hour in prayer every evening—and my young kids are leading the prayer! It’s the favorite part of my day. " --WPA Pastor

Connellsville District

- Somerset: Bethany UMC, served by Rev. Barry Ritenour, worked with local teachers to re-design the Somerset County mobile food bank for social distancing and fed approximately 8,500 people this month.
- Somerset: Calvary UMC, served by Rev. Arnold McFarland, is feeding more than 200 people a day through the church kitchen.
- Jacobs Creek/Owensdale Charge, served by Rev. Kim King, did drive-in blessing on Palm Sunday. She blessed each car and gave them a palm branch in what was her last act as pastor. The following Tuesday Rev. King went to be with the Lord.

Erie/Meadville District

- The New Richmond Church is distributing food to all families in the Maplewood School district that qualify for the free breakfast and lunch program. A major miracle has been the increase of support from sister congregations in the Sub-District. Last month over $4000 was received from individuals and congregations in the area.
- Tori Heath and the people of Waterford: Asbury held an appropriately "socially distanced," Prayer Walk; praying against COVID-19 and for the health and safety of the community. People walked from different points in the community, converging upon the Church parking lot. Residents joined in when they discovered the purpose of the walk. This Church has also organized pray from home vigils.
- The Cochranton United Methodist Church held a parking lot service on Easter morning that was broadcast over a local radio station and on the station's Facebook page. A typical Easter Sunday for this Church would be 80 persons. Around 70 were in the parking lot and close to 200 tuned in online from across the United States.
- Stone United Methodist Church, which has struggled with paying their apportionments in full for the last several years, decided to make their 2020 payment in its entirety using funds from a recent bequest.
Johnstown District

• Oakland UMC did a drive-in service on Easter with the pastors and worship leader on the rooftop so all could see them.
• UM Human Services continues to help people facing emergencies and the food bank continues.
• An elementary school principal, a member of Mt. Olive UMC, has been organizing meals for the children that are distributed at several United Methodist Church parking lots.
• Oakland UMC is organizing a prayer partner program so school teachers have personal prayer support.
• A pastor who calls parishioners every week said he has had some very spiritual and personal conversations he has never experienced in person.

Greensburg District

• Delmont: Faith had 1000 hits on YouTube for Easter Sunday (normal Easter attendance was 300). Drive-in worship service allows Cindy Raptosh, whose foot was amputated, to attend worship for the first time in more than a year.
• New relationships formed between a church and local school. The church serves as a distribution site for student meals.
• Seven DuBois area churches are collaborating on virtual worship services.
• Creekside UMC had a drive-by birthday celebration for a member who turned 80.
• Members of the Allegheny River Charge did a drive by for their pastors.
• Food pantry deliveries adjusted to schedule pick-up appointments.
• Phone trees for prayers and devotions have proven to be valuable to people separated by COVID-19.
• Support for a family who lost their home in a fire.

Franklin District

• A pastor learned from a colleague on the district how to put his sermons on YouTube.
• Christ Church has offered its cable channel to other churches so there are now worship services shown all day on Sunday.

"I’ve taken the opportunity to reach out to inactive members. Several of these inactive folks were overwhelmed by this concern, saying they had no idea how much the Church cared or how much it would mean to them to receive a call from the pastor."
Pittsburgh District

- After hearing from Rev. Kellie Wild of East End Cooperative Ministries about the unique challenges COVID-19 crisis presents to those struggling with homelessness, Rev. Kelly Smith issued a call for bottled water to her South Ave and Mifflin Ave congregations. They responded with cases. Every Friday, Pastor Kelly and her family pick up water from church members and deliver it to East End Cooperative Ministries and Our Daily Bread.

- South Ave UMC has offered their building as a Grab and Go meal site for kids. A small team of staff and volunteers from a local agency put together breakfasts and lunches for the kids who come to pick up educational packets provided by the Wilkinsburg School District.

- Pastor David Ewing and the Greenstone UMC partnered with the local volunteer fire department to deliver 750 meals each week to needy families.

- Church Union has set up two sites for the Pittsburgh Public Schools to use as feeding and school packet distribution centers.

Kane District

- Food pantries are serving more people than ever. In one day 130 people were served in Kane. Olmsted Manor and many churches are providing meals by donation or for free. Calvin Cook and other pastors/churches are delivering groceries to homebound parishioners.

- The Kane drive-in theater hosts Ecumenical worship services every Sunday, while drive-by parades wished people happy Easter or simply let them know they’re being prayed for and thought of. Telecommunications are making some parishioners feel more connected to their local church than ever.

- Many pastors using one-call to send brief 2 or 3 minute devotionals 5 or 6 days a week.

- Jim Cannistraci provided transportation for a parishioner to go for a doctor visit.

"God is expanding my skill set to preach in a new way!"

Washington District

- Crossroads UMC received 90% of its usual giving levels through the stay-at-home period, allowing the church to launch Feeding the Frontlines, a local church partnership to provide meals to the staff at a local hospital one weekend; provide 1,000 Healthcare Encouragement Bags for frontline workers at local healthcare facilities, and provide food through small groups to those in need in McKees Rocks.

- Pastor Bev Gross of Speers UMC and parishioners stood six-feet apart in the front yard of a church member who was dying to sing hymns, read scripture and pray while the woman watched out her window. The woman’s daughter videotaped everything and her mother viewed the video over and over again. She died two days later, knowing she was loved and God was present with her in community.

- Rev. Jeff Vanderhoff of Trinity UMC offers a daily Facebook live message for children every weekday afternoon, as well as during the Sunday online worship service. Pastor Jeff sometimes uses his magic skills with his puppet friend Patterson.

- Pastor Debra Mason reports John Wesley UMC’s virtual worship was viewed by people from as far away as Atlanta and Kenya.
Sherry Meterko, like so many, is now working from home, where, in addition to carrying out her duties as Indiana District administrative assistant, she has taken on a new role.

A quilter with a daughter working at the Punxsutawney Area Hospital, Sherry was aware of the need for mask’s in her daughter’s office and decided to do something about it. With quilting fabric all over the house, Sherry watched a YouTube video of a mask being made and developed a basic pattern. Then she went to Walmart to examine options for adding a filter for added protection. Sherry chose vacuum cleaner filters that can screen pet dander to cut up for use. She also got as much elastic as she could find and made 20 masks for her daughter Madeline’s office.

That was more than Madeline needed, so she distributed the extra masks in other offices in the building. The response was tremendous, with offers of donations and requests for more.

By the next day, Sherry got word of a nurse in the Kittanning Hospital who needed 40 masks. Sherry recruited family members – cousins and a niece – to help. Five of them worked all day on a Tuesday to make the masks requested.

The group developed a system and 70 more masks were produced the next day, with Sherry’s 11-year-old niece Allison ironing all day!

“I am sore!” Sherry said later in the week. “I took Thursday off to rest. Each night I pray that God will take away the ache and by the next morning I am ready to go.”

By Friday, she had a new order of 30 masks to fill for Home Health. She is using leftover Pittsburgh Pirates fabric she had for a project for her son’s room to make masks for men. She even recruited the boyfriend of one of her helpers, who, after learning how to fill a bobbin and sew a seam, challenged Sherry in sewing 150 seams in 45 minutes! Sherry’s husband also joined in, sitting outside JoAnn Fabric in Indiana for 40 minutes to pick up a mask sewing kit.

After completing more than 200 masks in less than a week, Sherry said they all feel good about what they are doing. “We are thrilled that what we are doing may save somebody!” Although their masks do not meet the strict protection standards required in all settings, they are better than the thin yellow ones many are being asked to wear repeatedly, Sherry said.

Sherry and her team don’t charge for the masks, or expect donations.

Sherry considers this project God’s will, not hers, and she is reluctant to take any credit. But she and her group after a week were determined to keep up with requests as long as they are able and can find vacuum cleaner filters!

Sherry is not the only United Methodist leading a group making masks. At Marion Center UMC, Glenda Mears, a church member told Pastor Erica Wellner that she was making masks, so the two decided to get the UM women’s group involved. The pastor invited anyone in the church to see if they would like to help financially or with materials. Pastor Erica contacted hospitals and nursing homes to see what the need was.

In the Washington District, Linda Schwartz, a longtime member of Trinity United Methodist Church, and her neighbor Betty Lucas, a newer member, began making masks soon after stay-at-home orders were issued. Two more friends joined their effort and they have made more than 600 masks for nursing homes, family, and friends. “We are praying everyone one will be well and safe during this outbreak of Covid 19,” Linda said.

Seven others at Trinity, most of them part of the “Crafty Women” group, made a total of about 600 masks by the end of April, mostly for family and friends. Elizabeth Peternel created 300, including 100 with a patriotic theme for a VA hospital.

WJAC-TV in Johnstown did a feature story about Diane Mickolick and Lundy Feathers of Ferndale UMC, whose effort to sew masks for other parishioners expanded quickly. By the time the story aired on April 19 they had made more than 175 masks to donate to churches, doctors’ offices, banks, and anyone else who needs one. They hope their effort will encourage everyone to follow guidelines to keep people safe during the pandemic.

“We have everything here. We are willing to do it. It’s a wonderful ministry. The need is there,” Feathers told WJAC. “And we are so happy to give to the people that need it because they are so appreciative. So, it’s awesome.”

Other churches who have created mask making ministries include Uniontown UMC and Dutilh UMC. Through their The Quilt and More Ministry, Dutilh has made masks for Cranberry Township’s Emergency Medical Department and a church member’s physical therapy practice. They have also been asked to make 280 masks for the residents of Sherwood Oaks.
Guidelines for Reopening Church

To return or not to return? That was the question of the day as state officials prepared to lift stay-at-home orders in some parts of Pennsylvania.

Church leaders are faced with decisions of when and how to safely reopen sanctuaries for worship. Dr. Jessica Price, a physician who heads the WPAUMC Abundant Health Team, recommends against reopening at least until June 1 — and then ONLY if your area is in the green zone on the state’s plan for re-opening.

Like a traffic signal, Dr. Price said, “yellow means caution.” The “strict restrictions under the first yellow phase mean that it is not safe to gather.” She points out that only groups of 25 people or less are permitted, masks are required, and “it would be very difficult to maintain social distancing to minimize risk of infection, even in small groups.”

As the PA plan unfolds, different parts of the Conference may be on different timelines under the red, yellow and green state plan. Everyone must adhere to current state and federal guidelines for their region.

As you consider having your congregation return to the church building, think seriously about the safety and well-being of your people.

While government guidelines may allow churches to open, it may or may not be the best decision for your church. Although many yearn to be together in worship again, it is Christ-like to consider the health and safety of others over personal desires to get back to normal.

Here are some guidelines for determining when and how to open. They are intended to help each local church make the best decision for their congregation and community. As circumstances change, so can guidelines. Remain flexible. Continue to monitor local health and safety guidelines and to look for updated announcements from the WPA Conference.

Don’t make decisions in isolation. Form a “re-entry” team that includes the pastor, staff and key lay leadership in the church. If possible, include a medical professional, and representatives from the Trustees and Hospitality team (greeters, etc.). Be aware of local government and health guidelines for your community.

Don’t abandon good practices that keep people healthy! Follow public health and guidelines as you return to your church building.

- Maintain 6 feet of social distancing, not just inside the building, but from the moment people leave their cars.
  - Encourage people to park with space between cars (every other space if marked)
- Have no physical contact between people (hugging, shaking hands, etc.)
- Wear face masks while in the worship space. Ask people to bring masks with them, but have a supply available for those who do not have one.
- Remind people to use hand sanitizer each time after touching or using anything in the worship space. Remind them not to touch their face after touching any surface. Provide hand sanitizer for those who do not have it or install touchless hand sanitizers dispensers at entrances/exits.

Consider how space can be used differently.

- Meet outside when you are able.
- Schedule small groups in large spaces
- Consider Drive-In worship settings using low-frequency FM transmitters.
  - Coordinate with local law enforcement or officials.
  - Utilize volunteers or signage to direct parking. Park cars in every other parking space (if marked)
  - Make sure everyone, including volunteers, staff, and clergy, follow social distancing guidelines at all times.
  - No one should leave vehicles for any reason.
  - No bathroom facilities should be available.
  - No playground usage.
  - Do not hand out bulletins. If needed, email the bulletin to people prior to the service so they have the option of printing them at home.
  - Do not permit anyone to exchange anything while at the service.

Don’t stop virtual ministry! Some people may not be comfortable with coming back to in-person worship for health concerns or fear of exposure to the coronavirus. Many churches have gained new followers through virtual worship. If these services are ended before healthy relationships are developed, they may fall away. Churches may need to return to virtual worship if there is a resurgence of the virus. Continuing virtual ministry allows an easy transition back to this platform.

Use positive, encouraging language to communicate hospitality while maintaining health and safety standards. Remember that people may still be anxious and fearful. Communicate needed information in three ways:

1) Verbal instruction
2) Digital communication (prior and during worship)
3) Posted signage in key places throughout the church building

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**Abundant Health: COVID-19 FAQs**
*by Jessica Price, M.D., chair of WPAUMC Abundant Health Team*

**Q. Why worry about the novel coronavirus? Is it any worse than seasonal influenza?**

A. The COVID-19 virus is different from influenza and more dangerous for several reasons. First, COVID-19 is more contagious than influenza. Current research indicates an individual infected with the flu can infect 1-2 other people, while those with COVID-19 can infect 2-3. Secondly, more people with COVID-19 require hospitalization and for longer periods than those with influenza. For example, up to 20% of those infected with COVID-19 become severely ill and must be hospitalized for an average of 11 days compared to 1-2% of those infected with flu for an average 5-6 days. Furthermore, initial data shows COVID-19 is deadlier, an estimated 1% mortality rate vs. 0.1% from influenza. Additionally, more people are susceptible to becoming infected with COVID-19 because there is no vaccine or established immunity from past infections like there is with influenza. Without a vaccine or drastic control measures, worse-case scenarios have projected over 80% of the U.S. population could become infected. In contrast, between 8-20% of people in the U.S. become infected with the flu each year. Finally, COVID-19 may prove to be prevalent year-round, unlike flu which wanes during warmer weather. The COVID-19 virus has not followed this pattern with spread in warm, tropical places like Singapore and the southern part of China.

**Q. Should I wear a mask in public?**

The CDC recently changed its guidance on wearing masks in public, now recommending “wearing cloth face coverings in public settings where other social distancing measures are difficult to maintain,” such as pharmacies and grocery stores. The reason for this new advice is because experts are learning more about how many infections are spread from asymptomatic individuals who did not know they were carrying the COVID-19 virus. Cloth masks won’t prevent you from becoming sick, but are there to help prevent others from becoming sick if you are an asymptomatic carrier. It is important to note that the general public should NOT buy surgical masks or N95 respirator masks, which are in short supply and desperately needed by healthcare workers who are in close contact with COVID-19 patients. In Pennsylvania, Governor Wolf issued an order that went into effect in late April that customers must wear a mask to enter supermarkets and pharmacies.

**Q. Are elderly people the only people who can get sick from COVID-19?**

People age 60 and older and those with chronic medical conditions like diabetes, heart disease, and asthma are more vulnerable to becoming severely ill from the COVID-19 virus. However, people of all ages can become infected and spread the virus, and even young, healthy people have been hospitalized and have died from COVID-19.
Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi, after consultation with her Coordinating Cabinet, Conference Secretary John Wilson and Conference Sessions Chair Alan Morrison, announced that the Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference session scheduled for June 11-13, 2020 at Grove City College has been canceled. The celebrations and the necessary business of the Conference will be cared for in different ways and at different places, she said.

"While much about the spread of coronavirus is still not known, including whether stay-at-home orders will still be in place in June, we decided to change our plans now. Concern for the health and safety of our Annual Conference members, many of whom are among the most vulnerable populations, was the most important factor in my decision," the Bishop said in an email to clergy and voting lay members sent April 3.

Rev. Morrison, who chairs the Conference Sessions Team, made alternate arrangements to care for all the necessary business of the Annual Conference.

• A one-day session will be held on Saturday, Oct. 3, 2020 at the Erie Bayfront Convention Center.

• The Clergy Session will be held the morning of June 27, 2020 at Ingomar United Methodist Church.

• Ordination services will be held regionally. The times and dates will be determined in consultation with the Board of Ordained Ministry.

• Appointment changes/retirements will still be effective July 1.

Reports and legislation that will come before the Annual Conference have been posted on this website at wpaumc.org/AC. Note in the reports that the 2021 session of the Annual Conference also will be held at the Bayfront Convention Center.

Clergy and voting members will be notified when registration opens for the Clergy Session and the one-day Annual Conference session. Efforts were being made to arrange blocks of hotel rooms at reduced rates for those who want to stay overnight at their own expense in Erie.

District Conferences will be rescheduled, and Superintendents will announce dates, times and locations when arrangements are finalized.

FREQUENTLY Asked QUESTIONS

1. Does moving the annual conference meeting to the fall affect the elected equalization members? No, the elected lay membership remains the same.

2. Since we are meeting at the Erie Bayfront Convention Center for both 2020 and 2021 Annual Conference, when will we return to Grove City College campus? The Sessions Team does not anticipate returning to Grove City in the foreseeable future.

3. How will the retirements and appointments be affected and handled? A separate Clergy Session scheduled for Saturday June 27 at Ingomar UMC will handle the Reading of the Appointments and Recognition of Retirees. The Retiree Recognition will be recorded and posted on the Conference website.

4. How will the election of Conference committee vacancies be handled? The Connectional Leadership Table is authorized to fill vacancies between sessions of annual conference.

5. When and where will the Ordination service be held? The plan is to hold four regional Ordination services at local churches during the late summer/early fall. The dates and locations will be announced when information is available.

6. How will we remember the Honored Dead? Clergy and lay members that died since the last annual conference will be recognized during worship at the October session.

7. How will reports be made to the Annual Conference? You’ll find links to reports on the Annual Conference page of the website at www.wpaumc.org/AC. The written reports are available there now. Some reports that are usually presented during the session will be prepared as videos and posted closer to the Oct. 3 session on an AC video page and on our YouTube Channel when available.

8. Where do we find the Legislation that will be considered at Annual Conference? Legislation that was submitted by the April 1st deadline is available online at wpaumc.org/AC and will be considered at the October 3 session of Annual Conference.

9. How will the Corporation Meetings be handled? The Corporations will meet in the late afternoon on October 3 to elect each Board and transact any Business coming before the Corporation.

10. How do we register for Annual Conference? Clergy members will receive an email when registration opens for the Clergy Session and all members of Annual Conference will receive an email in the fall to register for the Erie meeting.

11. Will housing be available for the one-day session? Anyone who wants to stay locally before the one-day meeting must make their own arrangements. Check the Conference website as information may be coming about blocks of rooms at a special rate at some area hotels.

12. Will the display and vendor areas be available? Yes, there will be space available.

13. Will the display and vendor areas be available? Yes, there will be space available.

14. Will the youth still have their booth selling drinks and snacks? No. Unfortunately, such a booth will not be permitted in the Convention Center.

15. How do we get more information on the Annual Conference meeting? Visit https://www.wpaumc.org/AC The conference website will be updated regularly. You also may email the Conference Secretary, Rev. John Wilson at conference.secretary@wpaumc.org.
Connections Key to Clergy Conversations

May 1 marked a milestone in a sense for the Conference program staff: The Clergy Conversations the staff offered twice a week since mid-March via Zoom moved to once a week. Designed to share information and ideas about conducting ministry during the Covid-19 pandemic and to support clergy leading congregations during this anxious time, the calls spurred District Superintendents and some clergy to use Zoom to connect with their flocks. The move to once-weekly was made both to allow staff to focus on others ways to serve local churches and to avoid “Zoom overload” for participants.

A variety of topics have been covered in the Zoom sessions: Pastoral Care, Resources for Holy Week & Easter, Ministry with Children and Youth, Stewardship & Finances, and Engaging with Parishioners without Technology.

“The greatest value of the Zoom clergy conversations for me is the connectional piece, and realizing that I am not alone in this;” said the Rev. Kelley Schanely, pastor of First UMC in Washington, PA. “I think the conversations have been connectionalism at its best.”

Amanda Gilligan, Coordinator of Young Peoples Ministry, took the lead in presentations related to youth and family ministry and sat in on several of the sessions. She noted the value of having participation of pastors of different ages and years of experience from all districts, serving in a variety of settings-- rural, suburban, and urban contexts.

“It’s been great to see so many clergy sharing their ideas, resources and expertise with each other,” said Shane Hinderliter, coordinator of Camping & Retreat Ministries, who helped to lead some of the conversations.

The opportunity to share ideas led to a group of pastors working together to script and prepare a video Tenebrae Service. Each participant recorded their part, and Pastor Brandon Moore edited all of them together into a video that was uploaded to YouTube and Facebook and shared throughout Western PA. The Rev. Debra Mason, pastor of John Wesley UMC in Washington, said she was inspired to plan an Easter Sunday parade during the Clergy Zoom Conversation with Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi.

“As our Zoom service was over on Resurrection Sunday, I went to the parking lot and my members came by in their cars. As each car went by, we exchanged greetings. I blew kisses and prayed over each carload. I had a few call me with regrets that they could not drive by, but it was the thought that counted the most. It was a fun way to stay in touch!”

The church finance-related conversations led by Conference Treasurer Roger White drew many participants as he provided up-to-the-minute information on the rollout of the Coronavirus Relief Package, its availability to churches, and evolving guidelines for the Paycheck Protection Program. The Conference and several local churches successfully applied for and received grants/loans to cover employee salaries for eight weeks. One of White’s sessions was also open to church treasurers.

In May, the Clergy Zoom Conversations are offered every Wednesday from 10:00 – 11:15 a.m. Topics include shifting to a new way of being in community; suggestions for health and well-being and maintaining an online presence when the current crisis ends. As new situations arise in the ongoing pandemic, the Program Staff will also include pertinent information to support clergy and provide needed resources.

“Top Take-Away” summaries of all sessions are posted on the WPA Conference website at https://www.wpaumc.org/covid-19-clergy-conversations. Everyone is invited to visit that site and find resources to use and share.

For more information or to suggest topics, email Rev. Alyce Weaver Dunn, Director of Connectional Ministries, at dcm@wpaumc.org.

Bishop's Initiative – WPA Coronavirus Relief Fund

The WPA Coronavirus Relief Fund was established to raise support for those financially affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Bishop announced the special appeal during her online Easter worship service. The funds raised will be used to assist clergy families in need, lay staff in need, and ministries in need.

To contribute, go to wpaumc.org/OnlinePayments or give through your local church. Individuals and external organizations can make an online contribution using their bank account or credit card.

Churches that wish to donate to the campaign from their budget (not remittance of an individual’s donation) can also contribute online; however, they should continue to use the Local Church Remittances page.
Lessons in Leadership: Cast the Vision

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

As I write these words, parts of the country are beginning to reopen. Some states are lifting restrictions and even in Pennsylvania, golf courses, marinas and private campgrounds will be allowed to open—with restrictions in place—on Friday. There are mixed feelings about these announcements: Some have been eager for them, others aren’t so sure they’re ready, and church leaders seem to be busy wrestling with the logistics of how and when to open the doors again.

In the midst of that I want to encourage you not to get lost in the logistics. Now let me be clear, I am not advocating for reckless behavior and rushed decisions; what I am saying is keep your eyes on the bigger picture too. Who are you as a church? Where do you want to go? Why are you reopening things or resuming ministries in any given order? Your job—maybe one of your most important jobs as a leader in this moment—is to cast vision.

The reality is that while folks are talking about wanting to “get back to normal,” that normal no longer exists. New practices and behaviors are part of our world and aren’t likely to disappear simply because stay-at-home orders are lifted. This isn’t a new phenomenon.

World events have changed long-term behavior many times before. For example, I still occasionally enjoy cream sauce on toast for dinner, a Depression-era meal that stuck in my family. Others hide money away in their homes, another practice born of the Depression. We don’t yet know what behaviors and practices will stick with us through this pandemic, but many could. Physically backed up when one of my own extended family members opened a door recently; telecommuting is being normalized; people have been hoarding supplies. At the very least, these practices won’t disappear overnight.

Carey Nieuwhof recently wrote: “Don’t get me wrong, I think the in-person church is here to stay. But the biggest mistake most leaders will make is the emotional rush to get back into a facility, to see everyone again, to assemble their team and get back to normal, they’ll re-embrace a model of ministry designed to reach a world that no longer exists.”

If all this is true and the world has been forever altered, then leaders cannot make the mistake of simply jumping back in to business as usual. Instead, Christian leaders must keep on drawing people into a vision of where we could go, drawing on both the past and the present.

Here are a few suggestions as you seek to cast vision in your setting:

**UP YOUR SPIRITUAL PRACTICES**- It’s impossible to cast vision if you aren’t caring for your own spiritual vision. Pray. Take Sabbath. Spend time listening for God and dreaming about the future. Journal. Talk with a covenant group. Read your Bible. Stop saying you don’t have enough time to take care of your spiritual and physical well-being. You can’t lead if you don’t.

**UP YOUR COMMUNICATION**- Do more than you already think you are doing. Trust me, staff, congregants and others are missing things. Use this time to explain your vision in newsletters, emails, on Facebook and Instagram, through small groups and staff meetings. Call people directly, check-in and listen to their concerns. Then do it all again. And again.

**UP YOUR PREACHING**- Speaking of communicating, if you haven’t already, throw out the planned sermon series or lectionary and spend a few weeks preaching on the gospel’s meaning for your people right now. What has Covid-19 done in your context: are there financial concerns, health issues, ability to offer help, inequities exposed, or desire for a slower pace of life? Preach in a way that speaks to these things and shares vision. There are lots of resources out there to help you with this, don’t be afraid to change the plan.

As we begin the process of reopening and navigating new social norms—in the rush to return—don’t lose sight of where the church could go. Don’t let others dictate the path you’re on. Cast a vision of what could be and invite people to join you in seeing it through.

Praying at 19th Hour to Stop Covid-19

As our world became encased in fear and uncertainty because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Western Pennsylvania Conference called all laity and clergy to an intentional, daily time of prayer. In the midst of the chaos, we need to stand in the power of prayer.

On March 24, 2020, Rev. Randall Bain, senior pastor at the Oakland United Methodist Church in Johnstown, invited the congregation to establish a new prayer pattern during the Covid-19 pandemic. He challenged the church to **pray daily at 7 p.m. (the 19th hour of the day)**. He encouraged members to read Psalm 27 as they prayed for 7 minutes for protection and victory over the virus. Rev. Bain’s challenge was posted on Facebook and other clergy and laity have adopted this daily call to prayer.

**Using the prayer pattern established by the Oakland congregation, the Coordinating Cabinet and Conference Staff invited all Western Pennsylvania United Methodists to stop and pray every day at 7 p.m. for 7 minutes.**

As voices are united in prayer at the 19th hour of the day, we can seek God’s healing power to eradicate this deadly virus. Though we may be apart during this time of anxiety, we can join together in the power of prayer!
A Story to Share: Hope in the Midst of Tragedy

By Donna Vizza, General Board of Church and Society

In this time of enforced separation from the outside world, our pastor urged us to use the sabbath as a time of reflection. This reflection led me to the focus on my trip to Germany with the General Board of Church and Society.

One afternoon we were asked to divide ourselves into groups and answer the question, “What made you who you are?”

Two members of my group were United Methodist pastors from different countries in Africa. They shared stories of famine, internment in radical military camps, and severe physical treatment as children. The third member was a United Methodist pastor from the U.S. Midwest. He has cerebral palsy, and every day is a struggle to physically complete the day’s work, with feelings of being different, noticed, perhaps teased or rejected. As I listened to their stories, I was overwhelmed by the tragedy and hardship.

When it was my turn, my first thought was that I had nothing to share. Then I realized it wasn’t a question of a tragedy I had overcome. For me it was simply this, “What made ME who I am?” So, I told my story. I was born to a father and mother who loved me. I’m the oldest of their four children, and I have three younger brothers. My father was a steelworker, my mother was a homemaker, and while we never had too much, we always had enough. And, I never had to worry that some one would take it away from me. That’s what made me, a sense of being loved and secure.

What about the other three stories I heard that day? In each story there was a core of HOPE, God intervening to bring good out of bad. We have a saying, “Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future.” We should never discount others or ourselves because of present behaviors or circumstances. Instead, we should be a source of encouragement and hope. We are to uplift each other, not deride each other.

In today’s world where things are becoming ever more divided, we should think back to the book of Acts. I’ve been reading Acts as my devotions since Easter; it seemed fitting to reread how the early church functioned. Think back with me to Acts 2: 42-44.

“The believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs THROUGH THE APOSTLES. All the believers were united and shared everything.”

What a hope-filled time and place! We are God’s hands and feet on Earth; we are to take care of each other.

Financial Focus: Making the Right Moves

by the Council on Finance & Administration

Ministry in our current reality can feel like the late stages of a game of Jenga - there are pieces scattered all over the place, the whole stack feels wobbly, and the fear of making the wrong move can lead to indecision or resignation. This can be especially true in the realm of local church finance when our most relied-upon method of income - the offering plate - is no longer an option. But unlike the game, where you just pile pieces higher and higher and wait for the whole thing to collapse, now is the time to get back to basics and shore up the foundation. Succumbing to indecision/resignation by not making necessary adjustments to new realities will create larger long-term problems. Working together, we can avoid those possibilities.

The constraints of social distancing and stay-at-home orders may tempt churches to throw established finance procedures out the window. Please don’t! It is vital that proper procedures be maintained. These include:

• Each church should maintain separation of duties. The positions of treasurer and financial secretary should not be combined, and pastors should resist any temptation to pick up any part of these duties.
• The treasurer should have access to all bills owed by the church, but there should still be a separate person, who is not a check signer, who approves the church’s expenses.
• While the preferred method of giving during the pandemic is electronic, counting the physical offerings that arrive must still be done by at least two people who are not part of the same immediate family, and should be done under the supervision of the financial secretary.
• Treasurer’s reports should still be compiled and reported to members of the finance committee, even if the committee is not meeting during this time.

Many of the ways local churches receive income and manage both income and expenses can be done virtually. This requires some flexibility, and there will absolutely be a learning curve, but it can be done. The following resources will equip your church to communicate your need, manage new methods of income, and shore up foundational practices so that a financial crisis beyond our control does not morph into one we could have prevented by using best practices and maintaining transparency. If you have questions, the Finance Team at the Conference Center is available to help guide you, as are the members of CF& A.

RESOURCES DURING SOCIAL DISTANCING

General Council on Finance and Administration:
• www.umcsupport.org/coronavirus

UMC Discipleship Ministries (www.umcdiscipleship.org)
• Local Church Finance Procedures During the COVID-19 Crisis
• Five Tips for Managing Your Church Budget During the COVID-19 Crisis

ResourceUMC.org
• Understanding E-Giving Webinar
Olmsted Water Project Moves Forward

Although Olmsted Manor had to cancel retreats, work continued on a major project to provide safe drinking water at the retreat center. It’s expected to be online by summer.

For more than 100 years, Olmsted Manor drew fresh water from the springs above the lodge for all of its needs. But last August during the regular monthly water testing, potentially harmful bacteria were discovered in the source water and Olmsted immediately went on a Boiled Water Advisory (BWA). Since then staff has boiled or used bottled water, which was also provided for guests.

After significant research, consultation with state environmental officials and exploration of options, the Olmsted Board chose to drill a well and set up a treatment facility that will ensure consistent, pure, safe water for the next 100 years. The total estimated project cost is $440,000. Much was accomplished through the winter.

“Our new groundwater well is on the south side of Route 6 near the Maintenance Building. We have spent the last three weeks with the drilling contractor doing the directional boring for the new water lines that will distribute the new water system to all of our buildings,” said Rev. Al Hammer, executive director, in a late April email update.

“It was a fascinating procedure with minimally invasive underground boring, going through sediment and rock, under Route 6, Two Mile Run and the basketball court, in the rain, wind and snow. Other than some landscaping cleanup that will take place later in the spring, they are finished,” he added.

“Construction began on the building that will house all of the treatment and distribution equipment this week. We are anticipating having safe drinking water ready to go before summer comes along!”