**Homestead Presbytery Forum – 4.29.20**

Unfortunately I started by typing in everyone’s name before we started sharing, and then I simply went to each person’s name in my notes to add their comments. Therefore the order of the conversation is out of sync. I won’t do that again. Sorry if this is confusing to anyone wanting to read our notes.

Duane Westing – Pawnee City

Stephen Earl – Homestead Presbytery

Jane Holtzclaw – Lincoln – We won’t be opening for a few weeks at least. I am reminded of what we heard at PDA meeting last evening about self-care.

John Duling – Lincoln Eastridge

Wendy Wait – Gresham – We are still planning through the end of May having our drive-in worship, which works best for our communities, because we don’t have very good internet in our area. We have transmitters so people can listen on their radios. We have no one in our community who has been exposed or tested positive. We haven’t checked with church insurance. I hadn’t thought about insurance being involved with this.

Owen Derrick – Tekamah – met with local ministerial alliance and decided to wait until criteria are met for the guidelines to open – will meet again on the 13th. All churches: Methodist, Lutheran, Catholic, Presbyterian, Baptist minister was missing from the meeting. We all agreed we would like to start at the same time. Greg Gahan was at the meeting this morning as well.

Pastor HPC (sorry, I do not know your name and this is what appeared on your screen) – It seems to me we are on a continuum and all over the gamut on this decision. I’ve been in rural areas, and some of you are in areas where there have been no cases or few of them. I am not where Zac is, but I am reminded that it is so helpful to have our hearts pricked by people we care about. Yesterday when I did a zoom church check-in, we have a child of the church who works with COVID patients. Her dad is a first responder also. She takes a shower before she goes to work, and again before she goes home. Just the idea of what you’re not dealing with is scary. I’ve been encouraged in our congregation. There is no eagerness to get back together in person. It is a lot easier for us because we are in great touch with one another online (session meetings and lots of phone calls). I think the “when” is an interesting question for all of us, but the “how” is going to be more interesting to me. There are so many questions on the how (for instance how to speak to a clan who doesn’t live together but wants to sit together.)

Stephen Niles – New Zion, Clarkson – met with session last night related to COVID and they followed CDC recommendations – we are closed until May 29th if situation remains as it is today – no COVID there yet, but Schuyler has several dozen cases (meat plant there). Catholic Church in the area is going to open up next week in North Bend and West Point following the governor’s suggestion.

Darin Bentzinger – Panama – I agree with Tom. We are with Church Mutual. I can’t see how a church can be responsible for people being infected. Insurance company has been noticeably silent on this issue which makes me think we would not be responsible. Guidelines say we should meet until there is a significant decline in the cases. Every state that has eased their guidelines has had a spike. We have to find a decision between what we want and what we should do. I, too, am in Lancaster county and that isn’t happening here.

Douglas Hileman

Jim Splitt – OSLC, Wayne – We had a meeting yesterday of a task force to be in charge of decision. Nebraska Synod has issued mandate to follow CDC guidelines to determine our decisions as our main guidance. They will come up with a plan to disinfect the church. We won’t open for the time being, until all things are clear. As long as Nebraska is escalating. No one is feeling an urgency to open. Checking with insurance/liability issues. Don’t want to be in conflict with state guidelines. So we are waiting, doing online streaming for worship. The mandate comes from the Bishop’s office which says to follow the CDC guidelines.

Kathleen Splitt – our session has shared in text messages and we seem to be on the same page that no one is in a hurry to start in person worship just yet.

Ray Meester – Stated Clerk – Lincoln – I am reminded of what someone said at last Presbytery meeting, “Just because you have Jesus in your heart doesn’t mean your brain is empty.” I think that says we should pay attention to the medical professions are saying and not so much the political leaders.

Thomas Dummermuth – Eastridge Lincoln – our current practice will remain until May 13th with continuing conversation going on. In person worship will be one of the last things we will do again. We will have to open the church office, probably in early June. We have to have a plan to disinfect and how to space people out six feet apart, and singing requires even more than six feet. I appreciate presbytery guidance received this morning. The questions to ask are very helpful in determining how to be faithful. Even when we begin in person worship, we will likely continue the live streaming as that worked well for people.

Karen Moritz, Lincoln – for those of us in Lancaster we are under different guidelines because the mayor has not lifted the restrictions. There is not a whole lot of conversation about the pastors. Thank God I’m in fairly good health, but I’m 61. How do we talk about our session/churches about this without seeming like we don’t want to do our job? We are starting asking ourselves the questions. I get a sense from our congregation that they aren’t in a huge rush. But one of the pastors in our disciples group is thinking about having worshippers sign a waiver so that if they get sick they won’t hold the church responsible. Our elder met on Sunday by Zoom. We have one member who is actively schizophrenic, and he doesn’t understand what is going on. We need to take into account that there are a lot of people who don’t fully grasp the meaning of this, and we have to be prepared for them who will likely be the first to return to worship regardless of the risk.

Jon Ashley – Fremont

Tommy Osborne – local ministerial is trying to figure out what we will do. We have a large Catholic presence in the area with a high school. Father put out to us that they plan to offer all masses for entire week starting on Monday, maybe adding a second mass in the basement on Sundays. So some people are biting at the bit and others are saying, “Whoa, whoa, whoa.” I am trying to figure out what my role is: to change someone’s mind, to oppose these views, to mediate? An excellent question! We haven’t checked with insurance, but how would it be different than a normal outbreak of the flu.

 Why would anyone who is serving a church on a beach, why would anyone want to retire?

Zac Wolfe – Beatrice – As someone who is immune suppressed, this is a lot more serious than the regular flu. I have gotten a flu shot, but this is a lot more serious, and I am not sure I will live through it if I contract COVID. I have asked first responders in the area who suggest waiting several weeks before even considering in person worship. I am thinking our numbers are always low in the summer anyway, with people traveling. I am personally concerned and we have a child due in July and if anyone is exposed in our family it puts our unborn child at risk. This is so much true that when the baby comes, we won’t have anyone to care for the other children. I am not eager to get out myself, and I don’t know a rush to move forward when we will know more about the disease. My brother just started to have spots on his feet yesterday, so he has likely had it or is getting it. I am more concerned about doorknobs and handrails, etc. Secretary wanted to know if she should put together a greeter schedule. I told her that if we do have worship we won’t have greeters. I believe that theologically, if we ask anyone who is higher risk to stay home, we ought to all stay home.

*At this point in the meeting I began to keep the comments in the order they were contributed....*

Jim Splitt – As soon as the governor started saying we can worship again, the Bishop was immediately sending out an edict that we are NOT going to worship yet. We need to differentiate between what the governor says and what is right, and we need to figure out how, etc. I think Nebraska is just starting to escalate. There is a really a sense of patience. There is a lot of good stuff happening, so I am hopeful that it will all be well. I am encouraged.

Sue Babovec just joined us.

John Ashley – we have a disaster response task force and they have been meeting regularly to monitor whagt is going on, and of course, things change daily. We are trying to sort out – we are doing everything online right now. We are posting on our site what we are doing. We have some who are ready to celebrate getting back together, and many others who are restricted at home in isolation at home or in a care center. On top of that the local health center says the restrictions are extended through the end of May, while the statewide guidance is a mixed message, and we have to decide who we will listen to. We are still waiting for clarification, and include that in our plans. Jon is with Tom who asked what is my role in this. I am just trying to get my head around how to help our elders make decisions and plans, and it has been kind of mind-blowing, each time new info comes we have to figure it out again.

Doug Hileman – we have two and maybe three people in our area, and that has put our plans on hold and we are not considering opening until June. One a Meat packer, one a convenience store and one a coop, so there are a lot of people who may have been infected.

Stephen Earl – if you haven’t already seen it the presbytery leadership team sent out a list of guidelines for churches to use. Please pay attention to that and think through it carefully.

Sue Babovec just came off a FEMA call. Basically the same things we hve discussed. Each church will be very specific. FEMA says churches may need to set the example of being cautious. Just because it is okay to do something doesn’t mean we should. They suggested a disaster response plan, which made me feel good about that because at our next Presbytery meeting we will approve such a plan. After we do that churches can use it as a template for their own settings.

 There was a lot of talk about the traditional things we do in worship: hymnal use, baptisms, passing the offering plate, etc make us as churches more vulnerable than other gatherings might be.

Duane Westing – had a funeral service in a cemetery. It was a 45 minutes service because the family wanted to a full service. We had space to spread out, but some who were visiting from out-of-state were hugging. I was uncomfortable with it.

Stephen Earl – this lifts up the concern about what to do when we disagree with our session.

Zac Wolfe – I am a believer in having really thought through things and having good background. If my session wanted to open, I will remind them I am high risk, so if you go back to meeting, that puts my life at risk. Sometimes I wish I didn’t have that excuse. Sometimes I wish people would hear it. In this moment it is our job to ask the theological vision of how we are supposed to be church. And if our session disagreed with me, I would say, “then we are not doing justice to our task as the body of Christ.” There is no cure there is no vaccine. We may well have to be doing this all over again if we come back too soon. I believe that God is speaking to me, and through some of the session member, but in the end if we are not being aware and serving even the least of these, if we are saying some can be sacrificed so we can meet for church, then that doesn’t seem faithful. This pandemic may help us some because it may help us to see we are not going to get back to the 50s, and probably never what we were in January of 2020. I feel like that is my role as the pastor, to help the members see this. If we have to follow all kinds of guidelines, it is in some ways more intimate to continue as we are doing. Things are going to have to change, and we are going to have to ask if church is truly about what it was in January. These are things I will share with my congregation/session if this comes up.

Stephen Earl – pastors don’t have veto power. We DO have a voice and that is how we work things out in our congregations. We might wish we had veto power, but we don’t. But the role we have as pastors is the prophetic role of how this plays out.

Thomas Dummermuth – I want to pick up on what several have said about doing church online, and the question Zac raises about being church together. I would suggest that being church together cannot be done in an online format. Some people are left behind. I came across a project. It really resonated with me, the idea of writing the Bible together. I put a website together with a vision of people all across the state to hand write the Bible, asking each person to write a chapter of the Bible to create something we look back on and remember the horrid things, but also have a testimony to hope and community. Find NebraskaCoronaBible.com to sign up. So far only the four gospels are available for sign up. If a congregation wants to take a book together he will open that book up for them. Another who is doing this is doing a sub-project, a campus pastor is doing a hymnal project. This has connections to the monastic tradition, doing something from their homes that will connect us all across the state. Writing is a spiritual discipline.

Stephen asks Thomas to post the website on the chat for everyone.

Thomas was asked what will happen with the end result. I am currently in touch with the monks in Schuyler but it will find a place eventually. I see this as a traveling exhibition across the state so congregations who participate will want to see it.

This conversation has been really helpful, says Stephen Earl, who struggled with coming up with the guidelines.

Duane Westing closed our time together with prayer.

Following is the chat transcript from today:

13:44:57 From Jane Holtzclaw-Lincoln : Could you address Tom’s question about the role of pastor when the Session wants to do something the pastor is not in favor of.

13:48:14 From Sue Babovec : I agree with Jane - although I am not serving a congregation right now - I have wondered what I would do if I were serving a congregation and the session said open and I wasn't feeling that a good thing to do!

13:48:37 From Sue Babovec : Duane's experience somewhat speaks to this issue to -

13:50:30 From Jane Holtzclaw-Lincoln : According to the BOO the pastor isn’t the one calling the shots. But is there a point where the pastor does have veto power and be in accordance with the BOO

13:53:32 From Sue Babovec : Jane - I believe the B of O says that God alone is Lord of the conscience - so if pastor (or anyone) else feels God leading to NOT open, then that is what they need to do. Perhaps not acting is an strong as a leader as one can be in these times.

13:54:10 From Sue Babovec : Zach - agree. Worship takes place in more than a building!

13:57:47 From Darin Bentzinger - Panama : Love it, Thomas...I don't want Leviticus

13:59:50 From Thomas Dummermuth : nebraskacoronabible.com