May 29, 2020

You are on my mind and heart as I carry you with me in my body and soul each day. Filled with gratitude for each of you, as you seek, strive, and are the Church today --- and tomorrow. Can there be any question, any doubt that you are Being the Church? No one can question you. For you are being faithful to God’s calling upon your lives. You are listening to the whispering winds of the Spirit. You are embodying the teachings of our Lord, Jesus Christ. You are being the Church!

Will you allow me a paraphrase of Scriptures? “For where two or three are gathered in my name [no matter what form your gathering takes], I am there among them.” (Matthew 18:20)

We are gathering. Whether by phone; or a quiet hello at the front door as you drop off a card or flowers or food; or by technology such as a taped video, Facebook live, Vimeo Livestream, Zoom, or YouTube. For many of you, your contact is limited to Sunday mornings for worship, children’s church, and maybe fellowship time following. For others, you are gathering for Bible studies, youth groups, coffee clutches, and hymn sings. We are a gathered community; gathered in by God to give thanks, to grieve our losses, to express hope in the midst of our own suffering, to petition God for the sufferings of our communities and the world, and to learn and grow in our faith.

But our faith is not for us, and us alone. Our faith draws us out of our own situation and circumstances. Our hearts and minds see how others are in need. New food pantries are surfacing, and existing food pantries are expanding to meet the growing need for food in our communities. Hundreds of masks are being sewn and given to our family, friends, neighbors, and organizations like Child Saving Institute. Hand sanitizer and disinfectant is being bought and delivered to people who can’t get it themselves. Funds are being collected and distributed to support people whose household income has dropped off.

As we enter the Season of Pentecost, a season to celebrate the birth of the Church, let us also remember that this is the day that the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples ~ ~ ~ a day when we are invited to remember that the Holy Spirit is upon us as well. To grant us new life in our baptismal waters, and in our daily living; yesterday, today, and tomorrow. And so, let me ask you what I am asking each minister and each church with whom I am meeting via Zoom in these days,

What does it mean to be the church today?

What about the realities we are facing during this pandemic makes you curious about what it means to be the church?
In my last letter to you, I asked you to please not gather together in-person again until at least May 31st. That day is upon us. And so, I am writing to ask you, again, to be thoughtful, prayerful, and deliberative with the church leaders in considering what our experts are telling us (please see attached “Resources and Guidance” sheet with new/updated information), as well as what our own experiences are telling us.

You have shared with me how there are other churches in your communities who are gathering in-person, and there is a growing pressure from within our churches to be able to come to the sanctuary on Sunday morning. That pressure is very real. And yet.

I have reflected, ruminated, and meditated upon all of the information found in the “Resources and Guidance” document, my own experience of journeying in this time of quarantine and social distancing, and a collegial conversations with 20-25 of our clergy during my weekly Clergy Zoom Call.

With all of those considerations, and more, today,
I am recommending, suggesting, and asking that each of our churches not gather in-person until at least June 30th.

Let me highlight some of the considerations I take into account, and which are included in the attached “Resources and Guidance” document.

A rural church in the State of Arkansas held in-person worship service, and later that week the pastor and his wife hosted an in-person Bible study. Not known to anyone before the worship service was that two people were carriers of CoronaVirus/COVID-19. As a result of those two in-person gatherings, 35 of the 92 members contracted COVID-19.

A rural community in the State or Washington had a 122-member community-wide choir. The choir practiced weekly, so while the virus was in its early stages of spreading in this country, the choir was invited to come to their regularly-scheduled practice. Only 61 of the 122 members attended. Following the choir practice, they learned that one person, while not diagnosed with COVID-19, was symptomatic. Of the 61 people at practice, 53 cases were identified, and two of those people died of COVID-19.

Here in Nebraska, a very rural state, we have our own stories. From counties with the largest numbers of people who have been diagnosed with COVID-19, to counties where there have been no known diagnoses, nor deaths. As for May 26th, Nebraska has 12,392 people who have been diagnosed with COVID-19, of which 155 have died. When the daily numbers of people diagnosed with COVID-19 and who have died as a result of COVID-19 are charted on a graph, the curve appears to be on the upward climb. There does not appear to be a flattening of the curve when we consider the State of Nebraska as a whole.

Within Nebraska, of course, there are counties where the numbers of people who have been diagnosed has been significant --- mostly counties where there are large packing plants (e.g., Hall, Dakota, Dawson Counties), and large population centers (i.e., Douglas and Lancaster Counties).

And there are counties where there are few, if any people who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 (e.g., Richardson, Pawnee, Gosper, Thayer Counties).

When I consider what you are facing, and the decisions that you as a Local Church are being asked to make in these times of uncertainty, I want to provide you with a clear road map, and a
measuring tool so that you can say “yes,” or “no” definitively. But, as much as you miss one another, as much as you long to hug your friends, as much as you desire to be in personal contact with one another, and as much as my heart aches for you -- for your losses, your loneliness, your frustrations – we are one another’s neighbors.

Our life of faith is shaped, in large part, by the Greatest Commandment to “love the Lord your God with all your heart . . . and . . . you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22: 36-40). We are also called to a life of radical hospitality. An openness, and acceptance of all people, for everyone is our neighbor. Including people who are most vulnerable.

The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services’ “Guidelines for Faith-Based Services” includes instruction that the following people remain home: the elderly (65+); people with underlying medical conditions (particularly respiratory diseases, diabetes, and auto immune diseases) and the people who live with them; family members who live with elderly who are sick; people who have access to people living in nursing institutions. The list continues, but that is a quick highlight from the Guidelines. And it describes a great number of people who sit in our church pews – especially in our rural communities where the current numbers of people who have been diagnosed positive has been few, if any. Let’s not risk being the place where people in your county are infected by carriers who did not know they were carriers.

We all know someone who is included in the guidelines of people who should stay home. We also know that those very people will find it difficult to stay home. For any number of reasons. But, regardless of their reason, it is up to us as people who are faithful, to consider what hospitality means today; to consider what it means to love our neighbor today. Including, and especially the most vulnerable people in our churches. I would say that, due to the CoronaVirus/COVID-19 Pandemic, we cannot ensure the safety of all of our members. And, therefore, do not believe that any of our churches should be open until at least June 30th.

In the days ahead, please join me in taking in deep breaths (“pneuma” or spirit), drinking lots of water, and reflecting on how you are “coping” with these new realities. Using the diagram in the “Resources and Guidance” take some time to review your choices and behaviors – are they mostly to relieve stress? Are you spending time to strengthen your resilience?

Continue to reach out to your neighbors, whether they are family, friends, and/or people in your community.

Ask your pastor how s/he is doing, and whether they are taking time off for sabbath. Express your concern for their well-being, and encourage them to take good care of themselves. Especially if their partner or spouse is a doctor, nurse, chaplain, or other medical care provider. Especially if they have family members living with them who are more vulnerable due to an illness or underlying condition.

And continue to connect and gather whenever you are able to join opportunities provided by the Local Church.

I long for the day when I will see you face-to-face. Until then, know that my love for you remains steadfast, and abides deeply. (1 Cor 13: 12-13)

With God’s Peace
Chris