Discipleship in the time of COVID-19.
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Friday evening (March 27), Bishop Jimmy Nunn released a video statement about how the Oklahoma Conference is responding to COVID-19, this pandemic which is sweeping the world. We turn on the news each morning to see how many have been diagnosed with this horrible viral disease and how many more have died.

What has happened in these few short weeks since the Thunder/Jazz game was called off just as it was beginning at the Chesapeake Arena on March 11? The economy has virtually shut down. Lives are on pause. People have lost their jobs. Stock portfolios have plummeted. Friends, neighbors and colleagues have gotten sick and some have died.

Churches have missed two to three Sundays of in person worship already and now are bracing to be closed through the end of April, at the earliest. Easter will be celebrated in our homes, more like the first Easter than the celebrations to which we are accustomed. The creativity we have seen has been overwhelming and amazing, to say the least.

If anyone was opposed to social media or the use of it for the work of the church, I suspect those feelings are being reevaluated every day. There are great ways to use social media, as outlined in this article by Rachel Gilmore of Path 1, our denomination’s new church start branch.

Wesley’s General Rules

United Methodists and followers of Wesley around the world hold true to his “The Nature, Design, and General Rules of Our United Societies,” today called “The Three General Rules.” Those being ordained covenant to follow and teach the rules in their places of appointment. During this unique time in our common lives, these rules have taken on new significance.

First, do no harm. We can do no harm by complying with guidelines issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as well as local authorities. In Oklahoma, we are under the “Safer at Home” order, issued by Governor Stitt.

It prohibits gatherings of larger than 10 people and regardless of size, a distance of 6 feet should be maintained between anyone. This enables us to protect people from danger. While most dangers are visible and obvious, the coronavirus is not. As President Trump has said, it is an invisible enemy. I think we all can agree.

Second, do good. Churches are doing outstanding work within the constraints brought on by this virus. As Bishop Nunn said in his video, “We are inspired by what you are doing.” That includes streaming or prerecording Sunday worship services, offering midday or evening devotions and times of prayer, reading books specifically for children or offering online platforms to small groups in your church so they can stay connected.
It is important for us to remember during this time of physical distancing that we do not have to be isolated. There are many ways to offer continued discipleship opportunities online. There are some resources posted at our website and you may be aware of even more opportunities through crowdsourcing.

What is most important is to keep as many groups together as possible. Or, this opportunity may provide you with the chance to start a new group. There is a good article here by Rev. Dr. Scott Hughes on online engagement for discipleship.

I have seen some very creative responses throughout these last few weeks. Here is my word of encouragement – pace! You need to find a pace which works for you. We were not sure in the early days how long this would last, but now we are getting a better picture that it may be at least through the end of April.

Ask yourself some questions: How much can I do each day? Each week? What is our worship plan for Easter and beyond? When will we offer confirmation? Could confirmation begin in an online format? How are the youth staying connected? Are we offering something for children so they do not feel left out?

The frantic pace we began this journey keeping will likely not be sustainable. You may not have content to post two or three times a day. How much are people using what you post? Do not be discouraged, but determine the pace which works best for you and those you are trying to reach.

A final consideration is this, “What if you get sick?” Pastors, if you are doing everything during this time and you get sick or someone in your household does, what is your plan? Do you have lay leaders in place to keep up with what you have in place? What other leaders have access to your passwords and access to accounts which will be necessary to continue your ministries? Begin to think about this alternative now and pray that you will not need to implement any of it.

Third, attend upon the ordinances of God. Public worship is one of the primary ways we attend upon the ordinances of God, but you are doing a great job in finding ways to help people do this. However, what resources might you provide to connect them throughout the week?

Maybe you could offer some scripture passages people could read in the days between worship services? This could be done by emailing them out in a PDF format. You could also choose a Bible study to do together through an online platform like YouVersion. There are a number of short- and long-term studies you could engage there. It is a great resource.

Holy Communion can be celebrated in unique ways. Bishop Nunn has granted permission during this pandemic for online communion consecration and serving. We have created a companion document with his instruction as well as some resources you might find helpful.

Certainly we can pray and this is a time to pray... alone, in groups via social media and during our worship services. The pandemic might be a time to share prayer concerns through email or through apps like GroupMe or Slack. I read about a church which has a joys and concerns box set up near the church where prayer concerns can be dropped off written on slips of paper.

Continue to express care and organize non-contact appropriate ministries which are contextually appropriate for your community, church and ministry.
Bishop Nunn encouraged us to review paragraphs 120 through 140 in the United Methodist Book of Discipline. Does that sound boring? I hope not, because you will find there a treasure trove of information about the work of the local church.

In addition to the mission statement of the church and the process for implementing the mission, you can read about the global nature of the church and the mission in the world. Paragraph 125 includes a beautiful “Companion Litany to Our Covenant for the Worldwide United Methodist Church.” Review that and include it in your worship services.

There is also a section on the ministry of all Christians as well as sections on servant ministry, servant leadership and our call to inclusiveness.

Smaller Membership Churches

The Oklahoma Conference is made up of many smaller membership churches, some of whom are saying, “We can’t pull this off?” Here is the hope and promise – you can! If you are unsure of how to get started, take a look around Facebook and see who is doing it well. Reach out and ask them for assistance. Their church is probably not much bigger or more resourced than yours. The conference’s pandemic response web hub has some tutorials for getting started and this article from the Holston Conference is full of great ideas. Check it out! Questions – just ask.

Giving and Stewardship Considerations

Churches are concerned about their budgets. But the balancing act is how to communicate about the church budget when the personal financial position of your members may be suffering. Certainly this is a precarious balance and can only be determined contextually. However, there are some overarching ways to think about giving during this pandemic.

First, you want to make sure you are offering ways for people to give. When live streaming or recording your worship, make sure you have a place to remind people of the ways to give. Now would be the time to set up online giving if you do not have that as an option. Organization like Tithe.ly and Vanco are two reputable ones. The Oklahoma United Methodist Foundation can also assist your local church with this.

Second, it will be important to remind congregants that the church wants to not only survive this pandemic, but be prepared to thrive on the other side of it. If major cuts have to be made in the short-term, long-term ministry will certainly be impacted.
Reviewing end of year statistics reported by local churches indicate that a majority (well over 75%) of our income comes from known givers. Now would be the time to connect with them, even individually. There is nothing wrong with asking and making sure everyone stays informed.

Finally, create a two to three minute video to be sent to all members and regular attenders explaining the benefits and importance of recurring giving. Send a letter with frequently asked questions, ACH/Sign-up Card and return stamped envelope. If your church requires each person to set their own account up online, consider sending both the instructions and “how to video.”

Serving Others

The area of our discipleship that has to do with serving others is a bit more difficult to do in a time of social and physical distancing. These “Chuck Knows Church” videos offer some great ideas for how to serve others during this interesting time. As of this writing, there are 20 videos for you to view. What can you do? Write a note. Make a call. Offer a prayer. Shop (safely) for others. Again, be creative and safe.

Don’t forget about what you already have!

Now might be a time to evaluate your web presence. How does it assist people in deepening their discipleship? There are a variety of options. Make sure your landing/homepage clearly instructs people on how to join your live or prerecorded worship. Is there a way for them to leave prayer concerns on the website? Do you have a blog portion of the site where you can share devotional messages or other relevant information? Remember pastors – laity have great writing skills and abilities too. This is the time to activate the priesthood of all believers (1st Peter 2:5-9).

Conclusion

As Stanford economist Paul Romer once stated “a crisis is a terrible thing to waste.” United Methodists around this annual conference are not wasting any time. You are dealing with this crisis in amazingly creative ways. You are seeing all the people. Even during a crisis ... even during a pandemic ... disciples can be made and the world transformed. In fact, there may not be a better time than now!