

Report To Southwestern Minnesota Synod Council

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In a blink of an eye all the plans got disrupted – for congregations, for the Synod organization and for each of us. It has been an interesting time since January! At the last Synod Council meeting news was just beginning to emerge about a new viral illness in China. Early voices in the wilderness were sounding the alarm. Responses around the world and around our country were fragmentary and uncoordinated. Then – all of a sudden – almost everything is closed, normal life and routine work was suddenly complicated by distancing rules and remote meetings, and we are all trying to figure out Zoom.

There is a bible word for moments like this – *apocalypse*. The deep meaning of this word – revelation. My old Greek teacher, Fredrick Danker, had a memorable gloss on the word. As I recall it, “The rug is pulled up and everything nasty and hidden is now open for inspection.”

Here are some things that are revealed

Many congregations have responded with unexpected resilience and creativity. Many congregations have seen financial support increase. Ideas that had been under consideration for some time without much progress – like setting up digital giving and putting worship online - simply happened. Congregations report that they are reaching people they've not imagined. There has been creativity and flexibility all over the place! Interestingly I can see no correlation with congregational size, location, or type of community. Congregations in rural, town and cities have responded with resilience and discovered new energy.

THE OUR WORK HAS CHANGED, AND NOT CHANGED

In one sense I have seen little change in my work as Synod Minister for Equipping Congregations. It is always about helping leaders lead more effectively, helping congregations work through call processes, to discover new ways of serving.

I believe that one equips congregations by equipping their leaders. This often takes the form of coaching lay leaders. In these days that has often meant helping councils and pastors figure out how to have remote meetings that are both legal and effective.

Tammy Schacher and I took the point on helping congregations through the process of applying for Payroll Protection Program loans. It took the SBA a while to sort out the rules and procedures. What we were told in the morning would change in the afternoon. The support and guidance of the Churchwide Organization was invaluable.

THE WORK GOES ON

Equipping Congregations Day happened as planned on February 29 at Vinje and Bethel Churches in Willmar. This year the weather cooperated and we had about 700 attend. Due to a new registration process, first suggested by Kristen Bakeberg, we had a more accurate planning figure which helped to lower costs and result in less food waste. *I remember this as the last event we had under normal conditions.*

Ministry Basics is an initiative of the Equipping Congregations Committee of the Council that aims to equip lay leaders for the work of ministry. We had been planning for months for a *Ministry Basics: Becoming a Visiting Congregation* on April 4. That was transformed into a Webinar *Ministry and COVID-19*. We looked at the public health situation, Lutheran theological resources and practical implications of the then just developing restrictions. About 35 accounts logged in,

representing (by our best guess) about 50 individuals. The tentative plan is to have a Ministry Basics which focuses on effective Congregation Councils and officers in the fall.

The Synod Congregational Resource Team continues to do their work, just a little slower than I had anticipated. We had teams at some stage of working with four congregations at the time of the shut down and are now beginning to look at how the needs for the interventions may have changed. Team members are doing *ad hoc* coaching as they have opportunities.

The ongoing work of supporting congregations continues.

Call processes are beginning to get underway again. One congregation appears close to having a candidate of choice and thinking through how to have a Congregational Meeting remotely.

I have regular contact with conference pastor groups, including a previously planned in-service training on Emotional Systems Theory.

I led a previously planned Council retreat on Zoom.

“IN THE CHURCH THE SONG GOES ON.”

A line from the hymn, “Holy God, We Praise Your Name,” (ELW 414) has been in my mind for the last few weeks. This hymn is based on *Te Deum laudamus*, the ancient hymn of the church that calls all creation, in heaven and on earth, into a praise of the Triune God. Stanza 3 of the hymn ends, “and from morn to set of sun/through the church the song goes on.” So it does, and so it will, as we await the day when all things will be revealed in the light of the Risen Christ. In the meantime, we wait and watch and serve, trusting the promise with hope.

Respectfully submitted,

Stephen W Cook