



Striving to Be of One Mind in a Time of Pandemic

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Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel. (Phil 1:27)

REMEMBERING THE BEGINNING

Do you remember where you were when the disruptive reality of COVID-19 really struck home? Was there a particular moment? For me it was a beautiful, crisp late-winter day. Several of our staff gathered at the new TPT Public TV building in Granite Falls, Minnesota, to check in with our teachers and participants in the Luther Seminary Faithful Innovation Project.¹ The room was full of bright younger pastors. The innovation process encouraged our group to meet outside of normal space to stimulate our creativity and engagement with our broader community. When we started this project, we did not realize that hearing a call to slow

¹ For more information on the project, see <https://faithlead.luthersem.edu/communities/judicatories/>.

So much has happened in the past year that much of the pandemic and response seems lost in a fog. Here a Lutheran bishop recounts the course of the pandemic in his synod and the ways his pastors and congregations reacted and adjusted to these often fast-paced events, and shows how they attempted to refocus their life together around the ever-constant love of God.

down and listen for God, acting out what it looks like to build muscles for innovation, and sharing results from our experiments would equip us for the coming journey through a pandemic too.

Not many days later we were in the beginning of the quarantine phase of the pandemic. That meeting had ended prematurely at noon as phones began to buzz and decisions needed to be made back home. As leaders, we were wrestling with appropriate and inappropriate fears. We knew there was trouble in the ditches of either too little or too strong a response. All of us were scrambling, trying to figure out where we were and to build a plan. All kinds of assumptions about our life and being church were about to be disrupted. What a wild, amazing, dangerous, and complex ride it has been through these nine months and continues to be as we seek to “strive with one mind for the sake of the gospel” (Phil 1:27).

I WONDER . . .

I wonder how this slow-moving disaster will open theological questions and the many ways it will impact our experience of being church in the coming years. Will it deepen individual faith practice or weaken it? Will we see a deepening of communal faith life, or will we return to our former communal place-based spirituality? How will our relationship to our church buildings change after learning that the church is not the building and never actually closed? Will this moment, with its innovation and translation, help us connect with younger generations, or will it make it even harder for the community of faith to connect with new, younger, and diverse people? What will happen to the institutional church? We will wrestle with where God was at work during this chapter of our life.

Though I lament all the losses and deaths, I remain hopeful about God’s church and know that proclaiming the good news of Jesus is crucial. The stress can make us stronger. We see signs this experience is strengthening our core. Our crucified and resurrected Lord has held us together through this pandemic. God’s Spirit has called us to listen, learn, adapt, and innovate. The virus has uncovered problems in our lives and in our life together that we will have to face. More, it has uncovered and developed gifts we need for this time and for our future.

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Through these days, weeks, and months we have known that God is with us and for us. That has made all the difference. God’s promises and presence will continue to give us courage as we move into the uncertainty of the coming stages. What will they be? I am writing this in December 2020. By the time this article is

published we will be deep in the “vaccination stage.” Will that open an “injustice phase” (where we become more aware of our privilege, our neighbors who are economically damaged, and our neighbors around the globe who are still suffering)? Or will it mostly be an “Isn’t this over?” phase (where we struggle to get back to a “normal” that is gone)? How will the journey look to get to a new and hopefully “better new normal” phase? It is hard to look over the horizon and see God’s preferred future. Yet God keeps calling us toward it.

THE FOG OF THE VIRUS, QUARANTINE, #STAYATHOME

Our staff and the synod’s leaders were all in shock as the depth of the danger and coming losses struck us in those first days, weeks, and months. The news grew worse despite what our political leaders were asserting, as the slow-moving disaster picked up momentum overseas and spread into our large cities. We read furiously to understand and prepare for this novel coronavirus. While we processed the information and consequences of what this virus might mean, we were still in denial of how deep, long, and challenging this experience would be. It felt like you were in unending fog that blinded you until the next issue appeared suddenly and required a response.

In the beginning we could not see the fault lines that would open between us. Congregations started adjusting and building contingency plans. Pretty soon the opening concerns about online communion were lost in a field of many other disruptions of time, patterns, and authority. New surprises came, like the questions about whether to take part in the government Payroll Protection Program. Running fast on adrenaline, again and again pastors, synod, and churchwide systems had to adjust our plans and practices as conditions changed. Our work boiled down to trying to figure out “How do we serve the mission of Jesus in our context for ministry, while managing risk in our choices and protecting the most vulnerable among us?”

In Minnesota, on March 16, 2020, the state guidance came down that not more than ten people could gather in any one place. Congregations had to decide if they would abide by the guidance of the federal government, state government, their synod office, and/or the national church body. People did not agree on many things in the beginning and middle of this experience. This apocalyptic virus has uncovered and intensified our differences inside the communities of Jesus in southwestern Minnesota.

It kept getting harder. Pastors and councils got sideways. Congregations sometimes felt their pastor or leaders were too cautious or not cautious enough. Some pastors felt their relationship with culturally different people in their congregation became strained or even broken. Sometimes we saw female pastors openly being treated with less respect in the stress of this journey. Even harder moments came, such as when a congregational leader directly told a pastor that their congregation would keep worshipping in person until the pastor got sick, without concern about the serious risk factors the pastor or their family carried.

The hardest moments were hearing reports of deaths, which appeared at this point to harden everybody into their prior stances on approaching the virus.

In the Southwestern Minnesota Synod, we focus on our call to “Embrace God’s Mission + Equip God’s People.” As we move through this unending storm, our staff team has tried to think forward in multiple scenarios and sectors of ministry. We focus on the most important areas and communicate to our synod’s congregational presidents, rostered leaders, and lay ministers in e-news, social media, and frequent Zoom calls. We equip our people to do church in an environment none of us had previously imagined. We have adopted new tools, like brief videos for social media to communicate directly to our people. One of the early and persistent pushes was to make sure we protected the most vulnerable in our communities. We learned from and with our pastors as we traveled deeper into the experience.

Across our synod very different things were happening. In the eastern third, people were more comfortable adjusting their lives to reduce risk and find new pathways to be church in the middle of the pandemic. Our rural communities to the west, and those near Iowa and South Dakota, were more uncomfortable with the proposals of the state system they often distrust. The fact that their neighbors in nearby states did not have the restrictions they did made it messy. Rules regarding the virus made sense in more heavily populated places and were perceived to not fit in places where few people live. The synod and churchwide system are heard with more and less trust depending on old and recent history. The ongoing wrestling matches about face masks would be one visible symptom of this virus that made communities sick. There were others below the surface.

The virus soon started to reach rural communities. Our many meat-packing-plant communities were the first in serious trouble. People working in packing plants were both the front line for food and the front line for illness. When they stopped being able to slaughter animals, the whole system of the vertically integrated pork industry started to back up, affecting many other lives. Nursing homes were hit next. Medical systems were on alert and short of protective equipment while waiting for increasing numbers of victims. In late spring, I started to talk to lay leaders who had been sick. They often said something like, “I have never been that sick before. I thought I was going to die.” One of our former pastors almost lost their spouse, also a pastor.

As you look back, you can see how people overreacted in some ways and underreacted in others. Everything was quiet for so long that rural people were lulled into a sleep that was broken with the outbreaks of late summer and fall. Suddenly, the struggles of other people or the “old and frail” people became a clearer threat to all people. As the county case numbers accelerated and positivity percentages rose, pastors started to get sick. Congregations started to see viral outbreaks in their area that stole loved ones from their families and neighbors from their communities.

As the spring moved into summer, congregations began to worship in cars or outside. Council meetings were held in parking lots, as were Bible studies and

worship services. Our happiest congregations decided to move out of their buildings after the #stayathome phases and the dial-back phases that followed. Some continued to do worship this way in November. As we move through the current serious increase of viral activity, congregations are moving back online only. Some are building enclosed heated spaces to return to parking lot worship, or they are using narthexes with glass doors or windows to lead worship with FM transmitters for people in cars. We keep learning how to live with the virus.

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DISRUPTION

COVID-19 disrupted “normal” in many ways. I will name a few. Our sense of time was disrupted as the normal rhythms and practices of a pastor and congregation changed. We had to end normal pastoral-care visitation and worship gatherings. People were learning to use online tools like Zoom, Facebook Live, and YouTube. Those who were tech-savvy taught the rest of us how to shoot videos and communicate online when gathering in our church buildings or meeting in person was no longer possible. The new communication pathways ate up time and energy. The constant decision-making as things shifted for the worse, then better, then worse ate up even more energy. Parents who were pastors began to have to work with their children in online classes or without the support of their families because grandparent support teams had too many risks.

Ministry was disrupted. In rural culture the importance of visiting with people who are homebound or hospitalized is high. This practice ended as hospitals and nursing homes shut down visitation to protect their patients. Pastors and ministers had to decide what level of risk they would take on in visitation in homes. Communal place-based faith forms of ministry have been the primary way we imagined congregational worship, fellowship events, governance, and spiritual support. As the virus shut down our buildings, ministers pivoted toward what was possible, a more household-oriented, practice-based faith strategy. Pastors explored pathways like morning and evening devotions online or home faith-formation tools.

Worship online and eventually in a hybrid form (with some online and some at home) became the new normal. People and pastors learned that worship also would become more asynchronous as people would participate in worship when it

made sense for them. “We loved listening to worship as we drove north to our cabin last night.” Some of our rural pastors ended up with a stunning number of views as their ministry spoke to people near and far in video or social media environments.

Serving is one way of living out your faith. Though many normal pathways were disrupted, people were great at reaching out and caring for their elderly neighbors and families who were on the brink. Our constantly creating God creates new ways to do ministry. God inspires us to see one another, care for one another, and limit ourselves for one another. Our Lutheran ethic that calls us to love our God by loving our neighbors in the midst of serious risk is both light enough to carry into every day and strong enough to speak to the different problems and dilemmas of this time.

Fears abounded in different ways for people who are culturally left, middle, and right. Some people wanted to be told what to do. Others did not. Our synod staff tried to balance sharing information, sharing guidance, and teaching our leaders how to discern their options and make their own best decisions that fit their local contexts. We did not always get it right. Sometimes we said too much, highlighted an unhelpful practice, or focused too much on danger. Other times I wondered, as people I know were buried, if we said too little. The wisdom of the principle of subsidiarity—having the people closest to a decision make the decision whenever possible—ran through our strategies and coaching of our congregations and ministers through something we ourselves could not fully discern. There was also plenty of systems thinking as we sought to manage our anxiety.

Another disruption happened when George Floyd was killed. In our vulnerability, God worked to open the hearts and minds of many for the work of protecting against the virus of racism. God continues to inspire more to prevent this virus from stealing away life in various ways from our neighbors who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color. Clergy and lay people are working to improve the future. There is deepened awareness about how racism functions in us, in structures, and in communities. This work on racism has led to deeper engagement with our Indigenous neighbors and the many communities and people of color spread in pockets across our synod. People are acting by listening, learning, and reaching out to build relationships.

The virus disrupted normal power dynamics in congregations. Pastors and ministers reported hearing little response as they sought council input in the early days of the crisis. “I shared my concerns and ideas and all I heard were crickets.” Council members were overwhelmed in their personal lives and work. None of us had been through something like this. Pastors often exerted more power in decision-making than was normal in our rural and smaller-membership congregations. Multi-point parishes that always see things from different lines of sight had to sort out their path with much less time to work on finding the right compromise between their values. As we journeyed through the summer and fall, councils reclaimed their voice. Some congregations found greater unity through these conversations and decisions. Others have been splintered, with people threatening to

leave over decisions that sought balance between our approaches to ministry and protecting the vulnerable.

DISCOVERIES

The pandemic is impacting people's theology and faith life. People speak more about prayer. Prayers include asking for the protection of God. People speak about trusting the Spirit to guide us amid the uncertainty of the coronavirus as people discern and decide paths forward. People are practicing forgiveness, while also working on repentance for all kinds of sin that has been uncovered in this time. People are loving their neighbors in need inside and outside of congregations even though that is harder in the polarization of a pandemic. Leaders have been surprised by amazing financial generosity in the beginning and now as things grow harder with the virus in December.

Technology has made a big difference in our communications. It would have been much harder to get through this experience without the ability to do video conferencing, like via Zoom, or without the use of social media like Facebook Live. New technology, though disruptive, has helped congregations and ministers discover new ways to serve the mission of Jesus. Communication between pastors and leaders in our synod grew during the pandemic. When the #stayinplace orders and shifting phases began, initially we met weekly with our rostered ministers and every other week with our lay leaders to spiritually and practically feed one another and pray with them in conference calls. Our staff shared ways to do worship, visitation, governance, and administrative and financial work in a digital shift as many of us gave up our offices and began to work at home. Pastors and congregations were innovating and translating at a stunning pace. We highlighted discoveries and good mistakes. We also sought to protect people from becoming vectors of illness and to prevent an outbreak in their congregation. While we have spaced out those gatherings now, communication has changed for the better in our conferences and synod.

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There are so many stories that should be told of how congregations were willing to move in amazing ways to serve the gospel in this strange time. The scale of the shift and the rapid learning may be hard to appreciate if you live in a city where

GOD'S PROMISED FUTURE

As virus numbers blow up across our geography again, people are glad for the hard-won wisdom of earlier times and the safety of online gatherings. As I write, we are shifting back online as we work to stop the current wave of illness. By God's grace, we believe we can get through this and live into a better normal.

We will keep listening to God through Scripture, trusting that it speaks a living word about God's commands and promises for us in this time. As we gathered our lay leaders and pastors through the weeks, and then the months, of this journey, we asked them to share one word that captured where they were in their life and ministry. This word cloud is one from the opening week of June. It captures our life in this time well. It also reminds us of the honesty about life and the promise of our theology of the cross.

We trust that God is with us in the cross moments of our life because of Jesus's cross. There are no God-forsaken people, places, or times. Christ Jesus, who has walked and suffered with us, understands our pain and brings healing to our illnesses of all kinds. Jesus's suffering and death remind us that God is with the people dying alone and the medical people who are exhausted caring for too many people in what seems like an endless battle. Yet we are consoled by the promise that even death cannot stop our gracious God's work to defeat the forces of death, sin, and the demonic.

We trust that God's resurrecting grace will continue to pull us out of our little graves day by day and from our ultimate grave at the end of time. Meanwhile, we have been set free by God's grace to proclaim the good news of Jesus and to love all our neighbors, trusting that our losses can and will be transformed. ☩

*O God, where hearts are fearful and constricted, grant courage and hope.
Where anxiety is infectious and widening, grant peace and reassurance.
Where impossibilities close every door and window, grant imagination
and resistance. Where distrust twists our thinking, grant healing and
illumination.
Where spirits are daunted and weakened, grant soaring wings and
strengthened dreams.
All these things we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
Amen.²*

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² Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 76.