**CORONAVIRUS UPDATE – March 27, 2020**

When I was very young, I remember going in the evening to a local elementary school, where we stood in a line waiting for our turn with a medical team. When we got to the front of the line, we (my four brothers and me) each were given a sugar cube to eat. In the sugar was the newest vaccine for poliomyelitis. What I don’t remember was the concern that “polio season” brought to communities across the country each summer and how many venues – swimming pools, movie theaters, etc. – were virtually empty, if not closed, out of fear of contracting the poliovirus, which paralyzed or killed up to half a million people worldwide in the 1950’s. Philanthropic groups like the March of Dimes arose to combat this disease. Now, almost 60 years later we are facing another pandemic that has raised concerns and fears worldwide, coronavirus that causes the respiratory disease COVID-19.

* Our congregations continue to respond to the pandemic in creative ways, from [worship options](http://www.cfpresbytery.org/church-info-covid-19.html) to other events: Bible Studies, youth events (including a virtual scavenger hunt), and opportunities for people to talk, share, and connect online. Perhaps the prize goes to Maitland Presbyterian Church, which is assembling a virtual choir, inviting people to video themselves singing “Amazing Grace” to a version listened to over headphones. People are sending the recordings to the church, where they will be mixed together.
* On [CFP’s COVID-19 page](http://www.cfpresbytery.org/epsc-coronavirus-update.html) we continue to post resources and information as we receive it. Something that came to us on Wednesday was an Advisory Opinion from the Office of the General Assembly on celebrating communion during virtual worship. You can read this helpful document [here](https://oga.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/advisory_opinion_communion_in_an_emergency_or_pandemic.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0bNH4cjrVj6qv6doVU47Iup6SiXaWmccVSuf9ltkawflwMGKvBurNhzU4).
* The Board of Pensions also sent an email on Wednesday that communicates important information for the church. I am going to quote extensively from the email here.
1. **About pension payments and the current economy. “**The Board’s financial resources are sound. The current economic disruption is profound, and our expectation is that things will get significantly worse before any upturn in the financial markets can be expected. While COVID-19 is new, bear markets are not. The Board has lived through these shocks before, most recently in the 2008 global financial crisis and, before that, during the dot-com bust at the end of the 1990s. Our portfolio is structured to guard against such shocks. All this is to say that the Board will meet the promises made to each and every member and beneficiary!”
2. **About financial stresses faced by congregations.** “We know that congregations and our many other employers are likewise under financial pressure. Keeping your staff employed and providing their benefits is a priority for all of us. To that end, the Board urges employers to avoid layoffs, using furloughs instead where necessary. For any employee on furlough, the employer may elect to continue to provide benefits, as the Board is waiving the 20-hour-per-week requirement for benefits eligibility.

“Ensuring that small congregations can maintain pastoral leadership is especially important during this time of national distress. For those congregations that pay dues to the Board for one pastor under the required Pastor’s Participation structure, the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors will be considering a provision for dues relief at its meeting April 3. In the meantime, any congregation unable to pay current dues should call our Employer Services team to discuss the situation.”

1. **About financial hardships by Plan members.** “We know that some of our members may encounter extraordinary financial hardships during these uncertain times. Our assistance programs are there to help, and we encourage you to contact the Board directly, at 800-773-7752 (800-PRESPLAN).
2. **For emotional and psychological support.** “Healthcare does not stop with physical health. These are trying times emotionally and psychologically. Isolation in some cases and overwhelming closeness in others can strain us to a breaking point. The Board offers support through our Employee Assistance Program, which can be reached by calling 866-640-2772 or logging in to the [Cigna website](https://pcusa.pensions.org/e/779013/web-public-guest/4wryl8/108992501?h=v_J9xnVzlhDejOHw4yu_IDb3jTE-LYJX1GrkaddoHeI). (One-time registration is required; use **pcusa** for Employee’s Employer ID.) This service is available to anyone in a member’s household.”

We are grateful for the ministry of the Board of Pensions during these trying times.

* Finally for this installment, the Committee on Ministry will meet next week, with subcommittees meeting Tuesday and Wednesday and the full committee meeting on Thursday. Among their business will be some documents that Christina and I have been working on to give guidance to sessions on ways the congregation can cut costs, how the presbytery can respond quickly to certain concerns involving pastoral relationships, such as changes to terms of call, and ways in which the presbytery might support congregations or point them in the direction where help might be found. To that end, like many others, we are paying attention to the stimulus bill working its way through Congress this week, and what help might be available for churches/non-profits.

In closing, may you be comforted, blessed, and encouraged by this prayer by Dana Hughes, Transitional Presbytery Pastor of the Presbytery of Denver:

God of all Grace,

we don’t doubt that you are with us in the midst of this crisis,

but we worry about ---

 what tomorrow will bring

 who will suffer

 how we will manage

 when this will be over,

and we wonder if we’re going around a bend that leads

to rapids or still water.

In your mercy, Dear Lord,

swaddle us with your abiding presence

and keep us from flailing.

Rock us in your holy arms and calm us

so we may breathe

and believe that you are always here

though we cannot gather in your name. Amen

Dan Williams

Executive Presbyter / Stated Clerk