

Greetings to the Saints of Mission Presbytery!

So, things are beginning to open up. And for Presbyterians in south Texas, I'm not convinced that it's a good idea.

The number of new cases of Covid-19 have yet to flatten or drop. San Antonio flirted with saying that we've "flattened the curve" for about 24 hours, until there were 70+ new cases reported the next day. The same is true statewide. I am stunned by the arrogance of people refusing to take precautions in public settings, which does not bode well for those of us who want to venture out prepared or not.

Frankly, beloveds, I just don't think it's time yet, mainly because I love you and I want to see you and hug your neck again. When it's time.

I read a challenging article this week, thanks to Thomas Daniel and a sermon he preached this past Sunday. In their article "Leading Beyond the Blizzard," writers Andy Crouch, Kurt Keilhacker and Dave Blanchard make a most compelling argument for "why every organization is now a startup."

The bad news is that they believe we are not in a "blizzard," where one could hunker down with supplies for a few days until the storm is past. They argue that we are instead in "the beginning of a 12-18 month 'ice age' in which many assumptions and approaches must change for good." They describe what I have observed in you - that while this is most definitely a time of pain and loss, it's also a time for amazing creativity. But they affirm what we have intuited: there's no going back to the way things were.

The good news is that they identify two things which all businesses and organizations will most need in order to survive the ice age. And they are two things which we have in abundance: relationships, and trust. Friends, that's our stock in trade! We as congregations and as the presbytery, and even Synod and General Assembly, are well prepared to move forward because these are our common currency, the tools of our everyday trade.

Just yesterday I was on a Zoom call with the Austin region of pastors. One of their early questions to the group was, how can we continue to build relationship with and between our members in a situation like this? Their starting concerns were not about paying the bills or adding young families to the church, but rather: How can we create and build upon significant connections among our members?

Some of our congregations across the presbytery have taken the church directory and assigned pages for each Deacon or Elder to contact. One reported back that the first such phone call took about 30 minutes; subsequent phone calls took a whole afternoon. Relationships are being built. Some are opening up Zoom meetings before or after worship on Sunday to allow for “coffee time” with each other. Others are having Zoom Bible studies and small group gatherings. It’s reported that members are so very happy to see each other and to hear from their siblings in Christ.

Another colleague of mine is creating a “Photos from the Porch” booklet for her congregation members. Someone is going around to all the members’ homes and taking pictures of each household configuration from their front porch. The photos will be compiled with stories, poems and etc. to create a “pictorial directory” of this time. That’s creating relationships.

Other folks are creating or strengthening relationships with their pastors. You’ll see some pictures elsewhere in this newsletter of the saints from Shepherd of the Hills in Austin, who organized a drive-by parade to go past their pastors’ homes, just to say “we love you.” It brought both of their pastors to tears!

From a book called *The Speed of Trust*, I learned that it takes 6-7 encounters to build trust, but only 1 to bring that level crashing back down. We know that to be the case, don’t we? No one likes to be fooled twice. For the last 4 years, the leadership of Mission Presbytery and I have been working hard to strengthen the level of trust you have in us. I know it hasn’t been perfect, but I do think it’s been pretty good. Thank goodness we made that investment 4 years ago, so that we can now be reaping the rewards. I’m so grateful that we are all working side by side, especially in a time like this.

So, we’re in an ice age. It’s okay - even in south Texas, we have sweaters and coats to pull out. We can adapt to the changing climate and come out stronger on the other side, if we continue to build trust and strengthen relationships, together. That’s what the church has always done best.

Presbyter “Sightings” (as it were)

May 9 - Called meeting of Presbytery, meet with General Council

May 11 - Meet with Hill Country and Rio Grande Valley regions

May 12 - Staff, Victoria Region, Synod Personnel, Commissioned Pastor Task Force

May 13 - Stewardship & Fiscal Oversight, Corpus Christi Region, and Synod EP Forum

May 14 - Meet with San Antonio Region

May 15 - Meet with Committee on Preparation for Ministry