



December 3, 2020

Presbytery News

A note from PC(USA) Stated Clerk, Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson

FROM PCUSA NEWS on 12/1/2020 ---

The debate between state governments and churches over in-person worship during a pandemic reached a new level last week when the U.S. Supreme Court sided with religious leaders in New York state. The high court ruled that New York's efforts to control the COVID-19 virus in churches and synagogues by limiting the number of people attending religious services was much harsher than the restrictions imposed on businesses and other locations that draw a number of people.

The Reverend Dr. J. Herbert Nelson, II, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), says that regardless of where other denominations stand on in-person worship, he's still urging PC(USA) churches to stay the course with online gatherings.

"People are dying. We should choose life and life more abundantly as our Scripture requires. We recognize that church is not a building. It is a place of worship," he said. "We are able to worship remotely, and we've found opportunities to have worship through other venues that do not require us to leave our homes."

Last spring when the virus began infiltrating the U.S., Nelson urged churches to move toward virtual worship to protect members and their communities. In addition, the entire 224th General Assembly (2020) of the PC(USA) was moved to an online format.

“Social media has been a major asset this year. Pastors have been able to sit on their sofas at home week after week and actually preach. They’ve found a way to make it work,” Nelson said. “They’ve done this because they understand clearly that abundant life is important. It cannot be done if people in a surge are being asked to continue to go to worship when it would be detrimental to their health.”

Even as potential vaccines are being shipped across the country for distribution, Nelson says this is not the time for churches to let their guard down.

“Stay the course, however long it takes, so we can safely get back to some sense of normalcy and this pandemic is gone,” Nelson said. “I’m not sure we will ever get back to the way it was. I think we will be looking at a new normal in the days ahead.”

Nelson’s advice: Be creative.

“We’ve had conversations over the past year around the issue of having communion, we’ve pulled together hybrid services, combining in-person with virtual,” he said. “All of these things have been done virtually. I have personally had the opportunity to preach on many Sundays because we were able to film these in advance.”

Nelson says many churches are finding new people tuning in to their services and are gaining members as a result of online opportunities.

“Some church members have indicated they are not planning on going back but will participate virtually. Discussions are being held on how to best utilize their buildings to further help their community,” he said. “This is a time of innovation and to really be challenged, looking beyond our boundaries and serving a community, so that when this pandemic has ended, we can determine how we can be most effective in the days to come.”

In the meantime, please stay the course with online worship and be safe – for you and for others!



**IT'S NOT TOO LATE TO SIGN UP FOR THIS
ADVENT GIFT FOR HOMESTEAD CONGREGATIONS!**

"Reboot Your Worship"

The Gift of Revitalization: a 6-week interactive online

worship learning experience with Dr. Marcia McFee and the Worship Design Studio- **Free to You!**

This course is also tailored to approach worship practices during the pandemic and will explore the basics of sensory-rich worship design while emphasizing safety protocols and getting creative for online expressions without burning out. AND Dr. McFee will be getting you ready for your best Advent season ever all along the way! All you need to do is register (at no charge) to receive the emails. You can invite unlimited members of your worship team (or potential worship team members) to receive these communications as well. We encourage you to take advantage of this free offer (usually \$99 per church) made possible through our area's registration.

Register ASAP!

(You will get access to all 6 webinar videos.)

<https://ny163.infusionsoft.com/app/form/homestead-presbytery>

NWC&CV Committee's "Hope for the Journey Ahead" Lectionary Devotion 3rd Sunday of Advent, December 13, 2020 Isaiah 61:1-11

Whereas last week's passage (Isaiah 40) took place as the Israelites were preparing to return from exile, this week's passage takes place in the beginning of Israel's return to their homeland and their restoration of it, located in the third stage of the Isaiah writings known as Third Isaiah (chs. 56-66). We are no longer visioning how we are preparing to gather together in God's glory, but what is the vision once we are there. Seems pretty prevalent for what many of our churches are experiencing today as we go through what seems to be both an acute and long-term exile experience. Acutely, the uncertainty and disconnection of the pandemic has left many of our churches unable to gather together and trying to connect with each and worship God in our own homes or makeshift outdoor structures (the park, cars, online...), much the same way the Israelites had to figure out how to worship and connect when they couldn't gather at the Temple each Sabbath (one of their solutions was building synagogues). The long-term exile our churches are facing is consistent diminishment of "The Three B's: Butts, Bucks, and Buildings." While this displacement from the times of financial security and full buildings has been prevalent throughout the pandemic, these trends have been occurring for decades, meaning our churches have been experiencing exile for a while with the pandemic accentuating it.

Like the Israelites, however, God is preparing us to eventually leave exile and return home, but not the same home we left. As we see in reading the minor prophets of the Old Testament, the Israelites returned a land that was much different than when they left, and there was a lot of restoration work that needed to be done so they could thrive once again. So, what would be the vision that led this great restoration? The year of Jubilee. Explained in both Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15, the year of Jubilee ("the year of the Lord's favor" as Isaiah refers to it in 61:2)

is the celebration of the Israelites in the Promised Land that took place every 7 years and every 50th year that was characterized by the wiping away of debts, freeing of slaves, returning of land to its original owner, and the resting of the fields (not planting). The vision laid out by the prophet is that moving forward, Israel will live everyday as if it is the year of Jubilee and who's very way of existence will "bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners, and comfort all who mourn" (vv. 1-2). In doing so they will "build up the ancient ruins and repair the ruined cities" (v. 4) while "all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed" (v. 9) as their lives proclaim their God who "loves justice and hates wrongdoing" (v. 8) to the world.

This seems like a good Advent year to reflect on how God's salvation is not just a vision for a place and time in the future, but a vision for right now in the world we live in. A vision of an eternal year of Jubilee that was laid back in the time of Moses and Joshua, was claimed and lived out by Jesus in his proclamation in the Temple and ministry that followed (see Luke 4:14-21), and is being presented for us in this time of preparation for what comes next for us as a church in preparation and participation in the coming of Jesus and God's kingdom. For many of our churches, living into the vision of an eternal year of Jubilee would require us returning from our exile and rebuilding differently from what we once had. It would mean existing in new ways that are so different from the rest of the world that when people in our communities see us gathering as a church and living our individual lives, they would acknowledge that we are people of God. This would lead some to ask how they can take part as well.

What would it look like to return from this pandemic and be prepared to build-up and repair whatever ruins we may find to make them into things needed and relevant for our changing times? A suggestion that the Vital Congregations Initiative PC(USA) raises up for us is to move from a focus on "The Three B's" to the "7 Marks": Lifelong Discipleship Formation, Intentional Authentic Evangelism, Outward Incarnational Focus, Empower Servant Leadership, Spirit-Inspired Worship, Caring Relationships, and Ecclesial Health. In light of Isaiah proclamation, we ask how might we use these marks to live-out within our churches and communities an eternal year of Jubilee? What can your church do to build Caring Relationships that give people freedom to be who God created them to be and comfort those who are mourning in your church and larger community? What does your church need to do in order to have a clear and guiding mission statement, nurture the health of paid and unpaid church leadership, and practice more faithful stewardship to support greater Ecclesial Health? How can your church work for the transformation of systems in your community and the world that share the Good News of Jesus and "bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners, and comfort all who mourn" to practice Intentional Authentic Evangelism?

As we return from our acute and long-term exiles, this time of Advent is a time for us to prepare not only for a spiritual salvation that God offers us, but the physical salvation to be lived out here and now in the vision of the

eternal year of Jubilee. May the “7 Marks of a Vital Congregation” be a tool that you can use to live into God’s vision of salvation for your church and the world here and now. Let the hope of God’s promised return from exile give you joy and energy for this time and the future to not only survive, but thrive. And as always, the Church Vitality Team is taking this journey with you and happy to help you discern your role in this vision of Jubilee however we can.

Here’s to hope for our journey ahead,
Zac Wolfe
Pastor of FPC Beatrice
Moderator NWC&CV Committee

Healthy Congregations

January 30, 2021 from 8:30am CT to
4:30pm CT

Could your congregation use a wellness check? Learn ways to minimize or prevent destructive conflict, manage negative reactivity, and help your church stay focused on its true mission and purpose.

This workshop will be repeated on
February 18, March 27, and April 17, 2021.



[Learn More!](#)

An invitation to offer support to the staff at



Rev. Jeff Mildren, a chaplain at Bryan Health, is working on a community project for the employees of their Health system. He is asking community faith leaders to record a one-minute word of encouragement and hope that will be shared on their intranet system within their facilities. If you are interested in contributing to this project contact Chaplain Mildren on his office number at 402-481-3065 or his email at jeff.mildren@bryanhealth.org

Chaplain Mildren also said people could send cards for those working in

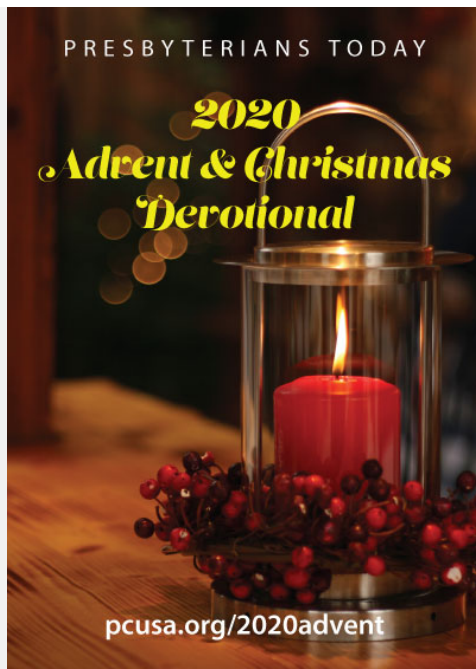
their facilities, particularly those on the COVID units. If they send them to the Pastoral Care office the chaplains will share them. He suggested this might be a good project for a Sunday School class or other groups in the church.

Mail to:

Pastoral Care Dept.
Bryan Health
1600 S. 48th St.
Lincoln, NE 68506-1299

As a former chaplain in several health facilities, I would like to urge us to remember all our health care workers, particularly our chaplain whose ministry is often overlooked. I thought this would be a great way to share some hope and joy during the holidays.

Submitted by: Rev. Dr. Karen R. Moritz
Member-at-Large serving First Christian Church
Lincoln, NE



Presbyterians Today Advent Devotionals are being published in an exclusively online format this year. They are available free at: <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/today/advent2020/>

New interactive Advent study series using award winning documentary resources!



This four week Advent study explores the sacred stories of Advent and Christmas through the biblical narratives of Zechariah, Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary in dialogue with short excerpts from film: particularly, the documentaries by the Story Ministry division of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, produced alongside the affected communities. Using brief clips as conversation starters and interweaving them with the biblical narrative and Advent themes, a dialogue is created between the Bible's sacred stories, our own human experience, and these also-holy stories from the films. Each week also includes a brief filmed interview connecting the day's topic with the unfolding impact of COVID-19. The films share stories that are drawn from the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami that killed 230,000, gun violence, refugee resettlement, immigration detention and environmental racism.

[Download the Study Here!](#)

**GRANTS & EMERGENCY FUNDS
FROM
NEBRASKA PRESBYTERIAN
FOUNDATION**



Nebraska Presbyterian Foundation

SPRING GRANT CYCLE BEGINS IN DECEMBER

Everyone has been forced to be more creative in their ministries since COVID began, so what opportunities has this pandemic created for your congregation? Does your congregation want to increase their impact in your neighborhood or community but lack the funds to get your big idea started? Are you facing challenges with an online presence with your current technology? Nebraska Presbyterian Foundation could be the answer to help you fund your project or program. We are offering annual grants to PCUSA churches and related organizations in Nebraska for new or ongoing outreach activities which enhance or expand some aspect of your ministry. The online application process begins in December and grants will be awarded in April.

KESSLER EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE FUNDS AVAILABLE

The Nebraska Presbyterian Foundation offers financial assistance for PCUSA pastors, or a surviving spouse, who is experiencing an urgent financial crisis. Applicants must be an active or retired installed or commissioned pastor who has, or is currently serving, a Nebraska congregation and currently residing in Nebraska.

For more information on our grants or funds, please visit our website at www.nebpresby.org or contact Audrey Richert at arichert@nebpresby.org, or 402-420-9877.

**Opportunities to Be Helped and to Help with
Challenges Due to the Pandemic**

Opportunity #1 --- Pastor Zac Wolfe of Beatrice First Presbyterian Church has announced that their Session will be donating \$500 for use by churches in Homestead Presbytery that have special ministry needs related to the COVID-19 Pandemic. An application for such funds follows and is due (postmarked or emailed) by October 31, 2020. At Beatrice Session's request, the Homestead Presbytery Disaster Response Team will review applications and make decisions regarding distribution of funds. If interested, please complete the application entitled "Application for Funds to Help Cover Pandemic-Related Ministry Expenses."

Opportunity #2 --- Beatrice First Presbyterian Church Session is also presenting a challenge to other churches and individuals in Homestead Presbytery inviting any that are interested and able to donate funds for the same purpose. They will match dollar for dollar up to another \$1000 to help churches with special ministry needs related to the COVID-19 Pandemic. This opportunity to give and have gifts matched will extend through December 31, 2020 or until the \$1,000 is matched. If interested, please complete the form entitled "Donation of Matching Funds to Cover Pandemic-related Ministry Expenses in Homestead Presbytery."

Per Business and Finance Committee of Homestead Presbytery:

That the Business and Finance Committee endorses the matching gift program sponsored by the Beatrice church for churches facing financial struggles in the time of the pandemic (a \$500 gift with matching donation from the Beatrice church up to an additional \$1000) and that the assistance fund be managed and dispersed by the Disaster Response Committee in accordance to guidelines and procedures developed by the Disaster Response Committee.

The funds should be sent to the Presbytery for accounting purposes, with immediate notification upon receipt of a donation being sent to the Pastor and Clerk of Session in addition to the chair of the Disaster Response Committee. Should, at the end of the pandemic, there be funds remaining, then the balance shall be designated for use by the Disaster Response Committee to respond to financial needs in the Presbytery due to disaster.

What an incredible blessing this is for both churches with needs and for churches and individuals who can step up to meet those needs. Thank you, Beatrice First Presbyterian Church, for your wonderful spirit of generosity!

[Download Application Here!](#)

Weekly Prayer Requests

Laurel

Being church in a year when gathering in space carries with it the risk of infection by a potentially deadly virus □ requires an extra measure of energy, intelligence, imagination and love. The good news is that the members of United Presbyterian Church in Laurel have an abundance of those gifts. Perhaps our greatest strength is that our membership includes a relatively equal number of members in every age group from birth through their 80s with one or two still active members in their 90s. Before the pandemic began, we had a super Sunday School ministry where the kids and the teachers were making

great memories together. During the pandemic a children's message by one of those teachers has been included in our Facebook/Youtube worship service each week and activity packets have been delivered to the children to go with the message. The greatest challenge of 2020 has been finding ways to be good stewards of God's gifts when we've been "gathered by God's' grace, but separated in space." One thing we accomplished this year was to apply for and receive a \$10,000 Healthy Pastors, Healthy Congregations grant from the Board of Pensions. The grant process included financial planning and education for our pastor and our church leaders, and the grant will supplement our pastor's retirement savings. We have only recently begun to gather for worship in the sanctuary, and our numbers are sparse. Furthermore, our pastor has announced her plan to retire the end of November, complicating our future even more. Another challenge in 2020 has been that several of our most faithful leaders have suffered with serious illness. Clearly the prayers of the presbytery are welcomed and appreciated as we find our way forward. Please pray that we find ways to remain hopeful and united as we discern God's direction and seek to follow God's way into and through 2021.

Homestead Presbytery

840 S. 17th Street, Lincoln, NE 68508

Monday-Thursday 9:00am-4:00pm

Friday 9:00am-12:30pm

Office: 402.474.0612

Interim EP: 803.556.3355

Stated Clerk: 402.217.3684

