



Clergy Webinar March 2, 2021

Bishop Goff opened the gathering with prayer, reflecting on the fact that we are almost at the one-year anniversary of the pandemic, which has affected our lives so dramatically.

She noted that we will continue meeting every other week for as long as it is helpful. In two weeks (March 16th), we will join together to pray, to participate in a liturgy of lament, loss, longing, and learning as we place before God all of this experience. Two weeks after that (March 30th, Tuesday of Holy Week) there will be a service of renewal of ordination vows.

Diocesan Treasurer Ted Smith announced that there are scholarships for post-secondary education for children of clergy and that more details will be forthcoming very soon.

The focus presentation on COVID burnout, stress, and spiritual, physical and emotional exhaustion was offered by Rev. David Mucha, a Methodist pastor and pastoral counselor who is on staff at the Virginia Institute of Pastoral Care, based out of Roanoke. He works with many clergy on these issues. His Powerpoint presentation can be found [here](#).

David lifted up the notion that we are runners running into a headwind. In that circumstance, it may be all we can do to hang on. There is not much in the manual for what has defined the last twelve months. One tool is to write your own narrative, telling the story. One mechanism is the arts, but each of us might find a way to tell that story, off-loading it in a way, to be able to both witness and to breathe. Studies have shown the more we can give voice to our pain, the healthier we might feel. He introduced the notion of perspective, that powerful tool of artists and draftspersons. What perspective might you have on this? Where are you in the picture? If you change your perspective, your place in the picture, does it help you to hold the hard parts of all this a bit more? What has been hard? What has been a blessing? Has anything changed? Can I change my position? Is my perspective positive or negative? What is needed to help bring a different vantage point on what these twelve months have been like?

He named the importance of embracing the biblical tradition of Lamentation, to find conversation partners, professional and otherwise, with whom to share one's struggle and grief and exhaustion. He also named the wisdom of approaching any major life-changing decision in the midst of this time with discernment and prayer. If it would be possible to wait until the dust settles to make such a decision, it is advisable, although we don't always have the ability to wait.

He also talked about a range of resources that might be helpful, including meditation apps, devotional reading, Spiritual direction, counseling*, and conversation partners, and the wisdom of the body in identifying when it is all just too much and you need to take a break.

He gave us permission to prioritize, to occasionally say “no” when it is warranted, with this prayer: “May you realize that thoughtful denial is not only a form of self-care, but also a form of community care, may you remember that not all requests are urgent, not all demands are valid, not all panic and punishment is yours to take on, and as you live into your own life-giving dissent, may it remind others that a current “No” is also a loud “Yes” to the future. Amen.”

In response to Dave’s presentation, Bishop Susan asked attendees these questions: “What things have you started doing in this time that you didn’t do before? What are the things that are giving you joy, or at least some respite in this challenging time?”

Answers in the chat ranged from regularizing the ritual of the Daily Office either through apps or the old-fashioned way with the BCP in hand, learning new things, returning to old activities that were life-giving, having some focused time with family, writing, reading, enjoying music, crafting, being qualified and volunteering as an EMT, creating new frameworks for the work we do, to regular exercise of varying kinds. One attendee said “going barefoot as often as possible!”

Others, though, named their reality, the shadow side of this time, noting the overwhelming nature of the work and the feeling they are just hanging on. They talked of the tiredness, which seems to be substantively different than normal work-tiredness – one spoke of this time being “work-demic.” It seems tinged with anxiety. It’s harder to have a sense of deep connectedness or to motivate parishioners, and one’s brain never has time to turn off. Difficult things which were manageable seem to have greater depressive force. This shadow side is consistent with what Dave talked about. Bishop Susan affirmed this, saying this is a time where our human-ness is made evident, and where we need to do what is necessary to find rest and respite.

Resources beyond those listed in Rev. Dave Mucha’s PowerPoint:

- “Ritual” app offers daily Lectio Divina. Another, Keating-based app is called “Centering Prayer.”
- Listening to the [Good Book Club podcast](#).
- Soul Rest, a great book and devotional for this season: <https://www.amazon.com/Soul-Rest-Reclaim-Return-Sabbath/dp/1683590627>
- The [“Everything Happens” podcast](#) by Kate Bowler.

*Support for behavioral health services is available through the Church Medical Trust. The EAP program is described in the [attached brochure](#), but once the benefits offered through EAP run out, behavioral health coverage is available through the regular health plan.

The session ended with a closing prayer.