

March 25, 2020

Within a matter of weeks, we have gone from asking "What if" questions about the COVID-19 virus to lockdown and figuring out what it means to be a church beyond the walls of our buildings. I cannot express how quick and honorable our kahus and church leaders have been to respond to developing advice and mandates to ensure the safety of all people across our islands.

This past Sunday I virtually dropped by the services of Koloa Union Church, Iao UCC, Hawai'i Kai, Filipino UCC, First United Protestant Church (both English and Kosraean services), and Hau'oli Kamana'o Church. A very small sampling of what is going on, but a very great sense of how the ministry of worship can be conducted by way of tools God has placed in our hands for times such as this.

As of the writing of this reflection, Kaua'i, Maui, and O'ahu are under work-from-home, shelter-in-place orders unless you are an "essential worker." From a crisis management viewpoint, pastors and church employees are not essential workers. Therefore, we need to be creative and imaginative in working from home and even producing worship material from home. I know the temptation is for us to "just run by the office." We need to understand that we lead by example as well as by words and our communities are watching us. We can be successful in new forms of ministry for the Spirit of God is with us, blessing our new endeavors.

The Conference office closed at 4:00 p.m. on Monday and will not be reopened until the Honolulu County mandate is lifted. Your conference staff will continue, as best we can, to work from home and provide support for our ministers, congregations, and associations. Please understand that access to our files and other such "hard material" will be limited and not all requests can be met until the shelter-in-place mandate is lifted. We ask that you contact us by phone and email. Most meetings have been moved to Zoom. We are working to remain available and reachable during this time.

Where is God in all of this? Allow me to pull on the insight of Dale Moody from his book *The Word of Truth*. God's providence affirms Divine care and concern for all creation. The word "providence" means "to see ahead," implying that God is at work in the present with a view to the future outcome of creation care. According to Moody, the clearest statement in the Bible about providence is from Paul: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to God's purpose." (Romans 8:28)

From this passage we can understand that God works in partnership with the processes of creation and human history to bring good out of adverse situations and events. However, we must keep in mind that the relationship between God and creation allows room for both finitude and freedom so that God's will may not always be the outcome of adverse situations and events.

From a providential viewpoint, faith is less about God's rescuing creation from dire situations and more about humanity cooperating with each other and God to move through the dire situation. We have the freedom to choose to heed the concerns of our medical leaders or we can act in other ways. That freedom and those choices are what God must work with in times of pandemics. Let us make sure we are making the best choices.

Rev. Dr. David K. Popham
Conference Minister