

“Have Faith” Initiative”

The Faith Community’s Response to the COVID-19 Outbreak

Notes from 6/18/20 meeting (via Zoom)

Greg Burris opened the meeting and thanked all for participating on behalf of Community Foundation of the Ozarks, Community Partnership of the Ozarks, United Way of the Ozarks, the City of Springfield and Greene County. There were 39 participants on the Zoom call. Greg welcomed all newcomers to the call.

Co-chair of the Have Faith Initiative, Rev. Bob Roberts, welcomed the group and shared that your life doesn’t get better by chance; it gets better by change.

Ashley Quinn, National Avenue Christian Church, provided the opening prayer.

Rev. Mark Struckhoff reviewed a few items from last week’s meeting and encouraged the group to review the notes that are available on the Have Faith website- www.uwozarks.org/have-faith. Then Rev. Struckhoff welcomed Mayor McClure to address the audience.

Mayor McClure told everyone about the new order that was announced last Friday. The city is now at 50% capacity according to the square foot formula. He said that contact sports are now allowed, and the next announcement will be July 6. The Mayor expressed concern for the outbreaks in Jasper, Newton, and McDonald counties. The poultry industry is credited with the current increase in those communities. He closed by asking the Faith Leaders to please encourage your membership to wear masks.

Rev. Struckhoff then welcomed Commissioner Bengsch. He echoed the Mayor’s comments and said that the virus is not going away soon. The county has opened up according to data, but may not stay that way if we don’t stay vigilant. He encouraged everyone to assume responsibility, and we can win this battle.

The floor was then turned over to Springfield-Greene County Health Director Clay Goddard. Clay stated that there is a lot of disease activity in our region. He indicated that the spread has flipped from being an urban-centric outbreak to a rural outbreak. Rural communities don’t have the resources that the larger communities have to combat or respond to COVID-19 outbreaks.

Northwest Arkansas’ case count is now at 3700. The CDC was called in to provide guidance. Jasper County, Missouri added 53 new cases on Thursday morning. The communities that are currently affected are tied to the mobility between poultry plants. The population that works in the poultry plants have language and cultural barriers to getting treatment, and they also tend to have dense living environments.

Remember that 27% of our cases revolve around travel. People are bringing it back to this area, and now we have an epicenter that is only one hour away. As the hospitals in the affected regions fill, patients will be transferred here.

There have also been two cases in Dallas and Polk counties, and a Mennonite community is being investigated. Those patients are being treated in the Cox ICU.

Clay then shared that if we don't be careful, there will be three categories of people

- 1) Those that have been quarantined
- 2) Those that are quarantined
- 3) Those that are destined to be quarantined.

He is hopeful that we will have a vaccine by next Spring.

Clay, Mayor McClure, and Cora Scott, Public Information Officer for the City of Springfield, then answered questions.

Question – When will the pools open?

Cora said the Park Board is aware that pools are used for heat relief and should be open in mid-July. In the meantime, the indoor pools at Chesterfield and Doling are open at outdoor pool prices.

Question – Is there a socio-economic element to the outbreaks? Clay indicated that those in poverty are most at danger, and that is the case statewide.

Question – What should be done as citizens when you see employees that are not masking, but should be? Cora asked that citizens call 864-1010 to report non-masking. The Mayor indicated that the City's order does take precedent over the statewide order. Also, keep in mind that Greene County has lifted its masking restrictions, so it will depend on where the business is located.

Question – Besides encouraging faith leaders to emphasize masking, what other things would you like us to tell our congregations? Please remind your membership about masking, physical distancing, if you are sick to stay home, and if you have symptoms, please get tested.

Cora Scott took the floor and spoke briefly. She recently visited with her counterpart in Joplin. They are now considering a faith leaders group like ours. There will be some media messages regarding masking soon. Lastly, she indicated that today there was a motorcade for Officer Piebe as he headed to the airport. He is going to Colorado for rehabilitation.

Rev. Struckhoff then welcomed Clif Smart, President of Missouri State University. Greg Burris asked Clif the following questions.

Question: Given the COVID-19 pandemic, what critical decisions are you and your team having to make regarding re-opening the university? What are your largest concerns?

Every university in Missouri will be open for seated classes this fall. MSU will also open residence halls for those students that want to live on campus. A core group is working on the big questions and then task forces to address all the thousands of related questions. The most difficult decision will be around masking. Most students are not interested in wearing masks, but the faculty and staff are concerned. It's tricky and political. Locally, Drury will require masking at all times. One school in Georgia required masks for summer school, and within three days, no one was wearing them. MSU will probably require masks in classrooms and offices. There will be significant challenges in enforcement.

Question: What are some of the challenging issues higher education is facing statewide?

Cliff responded that statewide, 12% fewer students filled out the FAFSA this past year. Therefore, fewer students are going to college. Couple the declining enrollment with the state's 10-20% reduction in funding. Cliff was on a Missouri Valley Conference call the other day, and eight schools indicated that they would be reducing salaries. It will be a difficult year financially.

On top of that, you add in COVID and racism-related issues, and you have some very challenging times.

Question: Higher education is an economic engine for Springfield. What do you see as the potential economic impact over the next year?

Cliff explained that in Springfield, next to healthcare, higher education is the second-highest economic driver. It is critical that students be in seated classes, so they will live, work, and spend here.

What do you see as MSU's role in addressing racism in our community?

Missouri State University has been a leader in our community. Cliff's team is exploring new and expanded initiatives to fight racism on campus and in our community. Our community has made some progress, but it is still an issue. To see what is happening, Cliff suggested that people look at the Twitter #BlackatMOState posts. It's going to take courage, but we can make a change.

Question: How can the faith community help support local higher education institutions or students? Is there a need for special support for international students?

President Smart has concerns for the international students that are stranded here. They can't return home, and their families can't come here. Many of the Chinese students don't want to leave their apartments. There is an International Friends program that is a great fit for churches and their members. All that is involved is to befriend the student, take them to various activities in Springfield, and just to chat. To learn more visit <https://international.missouristate.edu/friends/>.

Lastly, Cliff talked about a recent climate study that was conducted at 56 universities. Missouri State University fared better than average as a university. Students felt safe on campus. The only area where they were deficient was in community support. Students

indicated they felt less welcomed in the community. The Mayor is focused on this as well, and there is more work to be done.

Rev. Struckhoff and Rev. Roberts thanked Clif Smart for his presentation. Then there were brief committee reports.

Rennie Diekemper, a co-chair of the Food/Supply Drive Committee, indicated that her committee is still coordinating the feeding program for the homeless that are currently sheltered in hotels in Springfield. There has been a drop in the number of homeless that they serve, but they have been sharing the non-perishable meals with Harbor House. She is still in need of food providers and delivery teams. If your organization can help, please contact her at rdiekemper@uwozarks.org.

Linda Merkling, chair of the Coming Together in Faith Committee, is working on a Virtual Healing Event similar to the Chamber's Prayer Breakfast. Any input on that would be appreciated, and you can reach her at lmerkling@sbj.net. She also said the Healthcare Appreciation event has been put on hold for a few weeks.

Rev. Jenn Simmons, chair of the Community Spiritual and Mental Health Committee, said her committee is very interested in connecting churches and people to the services offered by Burrell and NAMI. We all need to be supportive of those working in mental health careers. She said Deanna Carpenter needs help assembling mental health kits, and you can reach her at kdcarpenter@sbcglobal.net.

The next meeting of the Have Faith Initiative will be a Zoom call on June 25, 11:30-12:30. Police Chief Paul Williams will be our special guest.

Daniel Ogunyemi, Burrell Behavioral Health, offered the closing mediation and prayer.

The meeting was adjourned.