

## “Have Faith” Initiative”

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

#### Notes from 6/25/20 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 51 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 our vision. *The Springfield/Greene County Faith Community will come together regularly to learn and gain a deeper understanding about our community and to share ideas, projects, and prayers with each other. Our community will be better and will serve as a model of connectedness across all faiths and all civic segments.*

Pastor Erica Gravely, Asbury United Methodist 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 Initiative website- [www.uwozarks.org/have-faith](http://www.uwozarks.org/have-faith). Mark also asked Have Faith Initiative participants to complete the survey that Vickie Hicks sent on Tuesday. Rev. Struckhoff welcomed Mayor McClure to address the audience.

Mayor McClure said that the city is now considering phase three in the Road to Recovery. His team is mindful of what is going on in southwest Missouri and northwest Arkansas. They hope to announce the next steps on July 2.

Masking has become a vital issue in the announcement. It is a volatile subject, and there is no community consensus. He is a strong proponent of masking. The Mayor said that Fayetteville, AR has a masking requirement, but leaves it up the businesses to enforce. He does not believe that it is the right solution. Joplin had a four-hour city council meeting, and their mask ordinance was defeated five to four.

The Mayor then responded to questions.

What number of COVID cases would necessitate mandated masking? The Mayor said that at this time, they don’t have a number.

What role does the city/county have in the debate? Is there a way to take politics out of the discussion? The Mayor indicated that you can’t decouple masking requirements from the government. It’s going to be controversial no matter what is decided.

Rev. Struckhoff then welcomed Commissioner Bengsch. He echoed the Mayor's comments and said the county is also watching northwest Arkansas and the spread into Missouri. He indicated that any masking control would be political. The Commissioner then discussed the hiring of Dr. Lyle Foster to oversee the CARES Act funding that the county has received. So far, the government guidelines have been cloudy, and they are seeking clarification before opening up for funding requests.

The floor was then turned over to Springfield-Greene County Health Director Clay Goddard. Clay started with an update on our neighbors to the southwest, where things are heating up. He said that there are 1,406 cases in Newton, Jasper, McDonald, and Berry counties. There has been a ripple effect in those Missouri counties and there is a link to the poultry industry.

In Springfield, there are 257 confirmed cases. Out of those, 97 are active, which is the most at one time that Springfield has experienced since the pandemic hit in March. We are faring well. They are watching southwest Arkansas closely; their ICU beds are overly burdened right now, which might affect our local capacity.

Clay then asked that you please keep our local elected officials in your thoughts and prayers. They are receiving a lot of feedback regarding masking. This is not gentle or constructive feedback. These are weighty issues and equally tough times.

Clay got a question regarding travel to see family in Ohio. Clay indicated that it is less about the travel and more about what you do when you are there. He suggested that people stay away from densely populated events and maintain physical distancing when possible.

Cora Scott, Public Information Officer for the City of Springfield, then spoke. Cora shared the extreme response to the masking discussion and that she has not experienced this type of feedback before. She appreciates the welcome she receives each week from this group. She said her department is working on a public video contest on the importance of wearing masks.

Cora indicated that the Have Faith Initiative Steering Committee met with Imari Stout from Black Lives Matter, Dr. Lyle Foster from Big Mama's Coffee, and Rev. Roger Franklin and Pamela Jackson from the Heart Church. The group had a frank discussion about what is happening in our community and brainstormed about ways that the faith community can assist. We will be inviting those guests to present to this group in weeks to come.

Rev. Struckhoff complimented Chief Paul Williams on his efforts to listen to the community. He then welcomed Chief Williams to speak.

Chief Williams started by asking for support and prayers for the men and women that serve our community. He then recapped the last few months. In addition to their routine day-to-day crime, arrests and victims work, they experienced:

- 1) The COVID crisis. They had to change their procedures. Because they pro-actively did this, there have been no positive tests for officers in our community. They are following safety protocols and are currently a shining star in the state. Unfortunately, they have had to cancel the part of their job they love the most, community engagement.
- 2) They experienced the passing of Chris Walsh. The first line-of-duty death in Springfield in over 80 years. Also, they have been unable to celebrate his life because of the crisis. No one on his force has experienced that before.
- 3) Add to that the George Floyd incident in Minneapolis. There is such a negative view of police across the country. This affects how the community deals with officers and how officers deal with the community.
- 4) As an extension of the Floyd death, there is a call for defunding the police. His officers hear that and think they will lose their jobs. 90% of his budget is tied to personal costs. His team takes that personally.
- 5) He recently had seven officers all retire the same day. They each had 25 years of experience. That leaves a huge void in his agency. Those retirements led to more on the plate of existing officers.
- 6) Lastly, many communities are now firing officers without waiting for investigations or due process.

Springfield officers are feeling an extreme amount of stress, trauma, anger, pain, and discomfort. Chief Williams did talk about the positive acknowledgments that many of his officers are receiving. But nonetheless, many are still seeking counseling or asking for time off. He asked those on the call to pray for his officers.

Then the Chief discussed the recent protests. He said that one officer had to listen to a chant calling for dead cops but, at the same time, make sure the protestors were safe and felt protected.

He said that there is no better place to be an officer than Springfield because:

- 1) Community support
- 2) Professional officers and the training they have had
- 3) Their response in difficult and trying situations

Chief Williams then added:

- 1) He was pleased with the Saturday protest of over 2,500 individuals. There was no rioting or looting, and he attributed that to conversations that occurred before the event. The event was permitted, organized, and lawful.
- 2) Regarding the protests at Battlefield and Glenstone the week before, he supported his officers when they decided to close the street down. Their mission was to keep people safe. He said that the officers on site did the right thing by not provoking the protestors and putting on riot gear.

The Chief indicated that some officers are considering leaving policing because of the current situation. A bright spot, there are 13 about to graduate from the academy. So far, they have interest from 10-15 individuals who want to be part of the next academy.

Chief Williams also directed participants to review their new web site, which contains FAQs and statistics. (<https://www.springfieldmo.gov/171/Police>)

Lastly, the Chief discussed Officer Priebe. He was the victim of a tragic and intentional act when he was hit by a vehicle at the police station. He has been moved to Colorado to the top rehab hospital for spinal rehabilitation in the U.S. He is positive and faithful. He is alive, his spirit is strong, and he has a very loving family.

Cora Scott added a few more comments. Please contact the city to get a permit when staging a protest. The Park Central Square is designated as Springfield's Free Speech Zone. During this crisis, there is a mitigation plan for protests. They request contact information for all protestors so they can conduct contract tracing if necessary.

Rev. Struckhoff and Rev. Roberts thanked Paul Williams for his presentation. Then there were brief committee reports.

Tom Ryan, a co-chair of the Food/Supply Drive Committee, indicated that their committee is still coordinating the feeding program for the homeless that are currently sheltered in hotels in Springfield.

Linda Merkling, chair of the Coming Together in Faith Committee, is working on a Virtual Healing Event, which is similar to the Chamber's Prayer Breakfast. Any input on that would be appreciated, and you can reach her at [imerkling@sbj.net](mailto:imerkling@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 still needs help working on mental health kits. She said Deanna Carpenter is coordinating, and she can be reached at [kdcarpenter@sbcglobal.net](mailto:kdcarpenter@sbcglobal.net).

The next meeting of the Have Faith Initiative will be a Zoom call on July 9, 11:30-12:30.

Janelle Reed, Victory Mission, offered the closing prayer.

The meeting was adjourned.