

DEFINING AND DEVELOPING A CONGREGATIONAL  
CARE PLAN FOR A LARGE  
URBAN CHURCH

A dissertation submitted to the  
Theological School  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Ministry

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May 2021



## ABSTRACT

### DEFINING AND DEVELOPING A CONGREGATIONAL CARE PLAN FOR A LARGE URBAN CHURCH

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The church is uniquely positioned to respond to those in need, as all are being impacted by the coronavirus in our country and across the globe. The COVID-19 crisis has provided an opportunity to define and develop a congregational care plan for First Presbyterian. First, the paper determines the scope and definition of congregational care, and second, I propose a strategy to be developed for an aging congregation in Fort Lauderdale.

By exploring various biblical narratives and conducting contemporary research on congregational life, congregational care is defined as the members of the church caring for the members of the church, with awareness and attention to the emotional systems in place and encouraging growth and health.

An ethnographic study was done in order to learn more about the congregation. This method allowed the researcher to create a narrative of the congregation, with respect to congregational care. While the pandemic has restricted our in-person meetings, the interviews were done via Zoom; members have discovered that video conferencing is providing a satisfactory way of being present even though absent. Stories were told, and I learned more about the church's history and how the members were woven into the congregation over a course of generations.

By combining the observations on ethnography and storytelling with the theological perspectives on pastoral care in the midst of a pandemic, a congregational care plan was developed. With the foundation in place from our previous leaders in the church, the strong deacon ministry at First Presbyterian can now serve as the building block for a more comprehensive congregational care plan. The establishment of a Congregational Care elder on the session of the church, working closely with the Associate Pastor for Congregational Care, will then implement a small group model which will include identifying leaders for small groups, training, and ongoing workshops on topics of interest. As we continue to listen and learn, the leadership may want to further revise the approaches we take to care for our congregation, as we continue to assess the needs within the congregation and in our community's life together.

## **DEDICATION**

**To Mom and Dad**

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## INTRODUCTION

The waiting room is a precarious place, where things could fall apart at any time. It is also a space of great hope where many prayers are said, sung, cried, or whispered. While serving as a hospital chaplain, my theology was stretched and re-imagined. Now, I find myself in the waiting room of a large urban church in a place where a congregation is hungry to be loved and cared for. This is, of course, “God’s waiting room,” as Franciscan brother, and author Richard Rohr describes what is going on in this precarious place:

All transformation takes place here. We have to allow ourselves to be drawn out of ‘business as usual’ and remain patiently on the threshold (limen, in Latin) where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown. There alone our old world is left behind, while we are not yet sure of the new existence. That’s a good space where genuine newness can begin. Get there often and stay as long as you can by whatever means possible. It’s the realm where God can best get at us because our false certitudes are finally out of the way. This is the sacred space where the old world is able to fall apart, and a bigger world is revealed. If we don’t encounter liminal space in our lives, we start idealizing normalcy. The threshold is God’s waiting room. Here we are taught openness and patience as we come to expect an appointment with the divine Doctor.<sup>1</sup>

Most times, we find ourselves in the waiting room without a choice. We’ve all been there whether waiting for a new job, pacing the floor of a hospital waiting room, longing for a word of hope that your loved one will survive. Maybe you are waiting in traffic, late for work, or at the DMV and your daughter is taking her road test to get her driver’s license. Some are seated outside a courtroom waiting to hear the verdict. Sometimes the waiting room is wherever you are, waiting for your circumstances to

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 155-56.



change, waiting to move into your new home, waiting for resolution in a relationship, waiting for God to show up, waiting for a phone call that brings relief. We all have to wait, and often, there are other places we would rather be. The church is uniquely positioned to respond to those in need of care as people wait in a variety of circumstances. Congregational care in the church is the ongoing ministry responding to those in the waiting rooms. This paper will define and describe congregational care in a particular setting, First Presbyterian Church of Fort Lauderdale.

### The Church in the Midst of a Pandemic

At the time of this writing, all are being directly affected by the coronavirus and is an emerging, rapidly evolving situation in our country and across the globe. For historical purposes, COVID-19 is a new disease, and we are still learning how it spreads, the severity of illness it causes, and to what extent it may spread in the United States.<sup>2</sup> The virus is spread between people who are in close contact with one another and through respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes. People are thought to be most contagious when they are most symptomatic, though some spread is possible before people show symptoms.<sup>3</sup>

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is responding to an outbreak of respiratory disease caused by a novel (new) coronavirus that was first detected in China and discovered in more than 150 locations internationally, including in the United States. On January 30, 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak a public health emergency of international concern. On March 11, WHO

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<sup>2</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Prevent Getting Sick," Accessed March 14, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

publicly characterized COVID-19 as a pandemic<sup>4</sup>, and on March 13, the President of the United States declared the COVID-19 outbreak a national emergency.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, churches must now take precautionary measures to help reduce the number of coronavirus cases in the United States. As leaders of the church, we must continue to nourish the spiritual lives of our members and neighbors but do it from home.

The waiting room now has a unique and special meaning, as we shelter in place and care for one another. People are not visiting their loved ones in the hospital, nursing home, assisted living facilities or even in private homes. The church doors are closed due to COVID-19 restrictions, and congregational care must be reframed. All are waiting for the day we can gather to worship and be reunited with our loved ones, but in the meantime, we wait. We pray. We call our neighbors. We ask how they are doing and “What is this like for you?”

#### CONGREGATIONAL CARE THROUGH BIBLICAL NARRATIVES

Waiting can leave us restless and feeling helpless, and waiting rooms can breed anxiety, especially in the face of the unknown. There are no guarantees, and the things we take for granted are called into question. In the book of Job, we find a man who is trying to make sense of life in the midst of waiting. His waiting room was a time of uncertainty, with many things beyond his control; he responded to a variety of difficult trials. While Job was suffering in his waiting room, he lost his children, his livestock, and his health - his body was covered in sores “from the soles of his feet to the top of his head”.<sup>6</sup> He was

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<sup>4</sup>A pandemic is a global outbreak of disease. Pandemics happen when a new virus emerges to infect people and can spread between people sustainably. Because there is little to no pre-existing immunity against the new virus, it spreads worldwide. ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov))

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Job 2:7 (NRSV)

cared for by his friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, who could hardly recognize Job: “When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.”<sup>7</sup>

In our congregation, the members are likened to Job’s friends, who can help one another to handle our waiting room, whatever our situation. All of us encounter life’s waiting rooms, and the church is called to be there with us and for us as we wait, whether short or seemingly unending; like Job’s friends, we don’t always know how to wait or what to do. Job’s friends showed up and they sat there in the mess of it all for a while. In our COVID-19 mess, we cannot show up in person. Rather, we sit in the waiting room from our homes. It doesn’t seem to matter whether we are in the church, at home, or in the hospital; rather, we all have issues and concerns and situations in life as we ask God to help us and guide us. We are in one big waiting room of life, in the church, at home, in our workplaces... in our lives. What we do in the waiting room matters; how we respond to life’s situations matters and how we care for one another matters.

In the midst of a pandemic, the congregation at First Presbyterian is currently in a liminal space and is ready to listen and expects to be cared for and loved by one another. The COVID-19 crisis provides an opportunity to define and develop a congregational care plan for the church. Towards that end (and a new beginning), congregational care must first be defined, and a strategy developed to care for this aging congregation in the heart of Fort Lauderdale.

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<sup>7</sup>Job 2:12-13

How do we take care of a congregation and what does that look like? We want to care for our flock and we also want our church members to care for one another. God created us to be in relationship with God and with others, and there are many references in the New Testament about how we are to relate to one another. In the Acts of the Apostles, Paul writes to the elders of the church to “keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, the shepherds of the church of God.”<sup>8</sup> Paul also wrote to the church at Galatia, saying that we have an opportunity to “do good to all people, and especially to those who belong to the family of believers,” the household of faith.<sup>9</sup> We are called to care for the household of faith, our congregation, our church members, and we also want to encourage our family members to care for one another.

In his first letter to readers then and now, Peter acts as a counselor. Peter had watched Jesus endure suffering, and in his letter, he points to Jesus as an example of how to respond. According to Peter, our lives are linked together regardless of our backgrounds. The pericope including the one another verse from Peter’s first letter reminds us of our togetherness: “Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power

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<sup>8</sup> Acts 20:28

<sup>9</sup> Galatians 6:10

forever and ever. Amen.”<sup>10</sup> Peter also argues that ministry is for all people: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”<sup>11</sup>

Towards that end, one of the scripture passages which guides our Board of Deacons at First Presbyterian is Galatians 6:2: “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ.” Paul writes to the Galatians to remind them that we must carry the burden of others, but those burdens can be carried by the church family. We all have individual burdens, and we carry each other’s burdens as well. How do we carry both our own burdens and others within a church family? The people of the congregation must care for the people of the congregation, and a structure must be developed and implemented in order to address the concerns and burdens.

#### CONGREGATIONAL CARE IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

The pandemic reminds us that we are all in this together. Even as social distancing is being emphasized as a crucial factor in the fight to prevent the spread of coronavirus, we are not alone. Author and Presbyterian pastor Frederick Buechner described the importance and sacredness of our togetherness in his book, *The Hungering Dark*. He wrote:

Humanity is like an enormous spider web, so that if you touch it anywhere, you set the whole thing trembling. We are all of us in it together. As we move around this world and as we act with kindness, perhaps, or with indifference, or with hostility, toward the people we meet, we too are setting the great spider web a-tremble. The life that I touch for good or for ill will touch another life, and that in turn another, until who knows where the trembling

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<sup>10</sup> 1 Peter 4:8-11

<sup>11</sup> 1 Peter 2:9

stops or in what far place and time my touch will be felt. Our lives are linked together.<sup>12</sup>

Howard W. Stone is a psychologist, marriage and family therapist, pastoral counselor, and author of a number of books on counseling and lay pastoral care. In his book, *The Caring Church: A Guide for Lay Pastoral Care*, Stone reminds his readers that all Christians - lay and clergy alike - need to be reminded of our duty to serve and care. Some churches even include this gentle reminder in the Sunday bulletin:

Ministers: All members of Hope Presbyterian Church  
Pastor: Rev. Jane Doe  
Director of Music:  
Director of Youth and Children:

As Stone points out, this mention in the bulletin may be considered cute and ignored, but at least it acknowledges that laity and clergy alike are responsible for caring for the members of the congregation.<sup>13</sup>

Though most people in our congregations would nod their heads when reminded, Stone writes, “there appears to be a discrepancy between what Christians think and what they do.” Apparently, there has been reluctance, lack of confidence, and even fear on the part of the laity as they consider the ministry of caring for one another.<sup>14</sup> How, then, does the church encourage her members to care for one another?

#### CONGREGATIONAL CARE AND FAMILY SYSTEMS AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

First Presbyterian is a caring church and expects pastors and members alike to care for one another. This 1,100-member church in the heart of Fort Lauderdale is a

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<sup>12</sup>Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1969), 45-46.

<sup>13</sup>Howard W. Stone, *The Caring Church: A Guide for Lay Pastoral Care* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 27.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.

family who have stuck together through thick and thin. In a period of two decades, this church had six senior pastors and several associate pastors. Due to lack of leadership and mistrust, some people left the church; some blamed the pastors. There was an extended period of time where people felt abandoned and without a shepherd. A pattern of betrayal was established and perpetuated. While the people who stayed are most gracious and welcoming, they were left without the feeling of being cared for and are in need of a strategy for implementing congregational care. Furthermore, the reality is that in a church with 1,100 members, the people in the congregation must care for one another since the pastor simply cannot do it by herself.

The lives of our members are linked together but the leaders must be even more intentional due to COVID-19 restrictions. Within just a handful of weeks, states across the country have enacted a range of sweeping regulations for residents – from the closure of schools and businesses to stay-at-home orders, including Florida. There is one goal, and that is to slow the spread of the virus. Suddenly, a strong network of congregational care is needed in the midst of an unprecedented pandemic. With consideration as to how our church family works, a network of caregiving is required to address the emotional, spiritual, and health needs of our congregation.

Congregational systems consultant Peter Steinke provides insight as to how your church family works and understanding congregations as emotional systems. His work will help us identify the systems in place at First Presbyterian. While congregations like to call themselves church families, Peter Steinke argues that the church is not a family; it's not as intense nor as committed as families are. Relationships in families are deeply patterned and reinforced, according to Steinke in his book on How Your Church Family

Works, and the emotional processes are similar in churches.<sup>15</sup> As a church we are called to bear one another's burdens; to love our neighbor as ourselves; and we are separate and connected. How we do that matters. How we care for one another matters. Steinke's work on understanding congregations as emotional systems reminds the church family that the interrelatedness of life is inherent with emotional processes: it's a matter of life, or as Steinke writes, "it's a matter of survival."<sup>16</sup> Therefore, we need to understand the relational patterns in the church and who can most affect change and growth for good.<sup>17</sup>

Currently, Professor of Pastoral Leadership at Baylor University, R. Robert Creech, is also doing important work on family systems and congregational life. In his recent book, Creech describes an emotional system at work, with everyone playing a part in the drama. He writes, "Each one is monitoring the others. Who is depending on me? On whom am I depending? Who is expecting something from me? What am I expecting from others? Are they meeting my expectations? Who is in distress? Are others aware of my distress? Whose attention am I seeking? Who is looking for my attention? Below the level of awareness, our emotional capacities are attending to and reacting to all the others in the system all the time."<sup>18</sup>

Both Steinke and Creech make a case for the application of emotional systems in bringing change for the better in a congregation. Life in a congregation is inherently about relationships. Creech points to Jesus himself, who taught his disciples about relationships - loving, forgiving, and serving others, and "nothing in his teaching or

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<sup>15</sup>Peter Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems*, (Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2006), xvi.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>R. Robert Creech. *Family Systems and Congregational Life: A Map for Ministry*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2019), 16.



practices suggests that Christian life is something that can be experienced fully in the absence of other people.”<sup>19</sup>

Rather than focusing on what happened and the good old times of the past at First Presbyterian, the importance and benefits of understanding church family systems beckon us to look at the systems and emotional processes within the church. This leads me to explore several dimensions, such as how did people respond when they were left to their own devices? What are the prevailing attitudes, for good or for ill, that motivate the congregation? How, as a church family, do we behave in times of crises? How do we care for one another when we are quarantined and are social distancing?

As we seek to understand our new context, while taking into consideration the current systems in place, the challenge, ministry opportunity, and the call of the people of the church is to take care of the people of the church, with all of our emotional systems and interrelatedness of life. For our purposes, congregational care is defined by the members of the church caring for the members of the church, with awareness and attention to the emotional systems in place and encouraging growth and health.

As the needs of the congregation are identified, listening is essential. Listening, at the same time, communicates that one’s concerns are being heard and the listener cares about the other. In his book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: “The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them.”<sup>20</sup> As the needs of the congregation are assessed, listening is caring. Responding to the needs and formulating a strategy will address the concerns and burdens of the congregation. The

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 101.

<sup>20</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1954), 97.

pastor cannot and will not be able to carry the burdens single-handedly; rather, the congregation will care for the congregation.

Pastoral care and congregational care have been used interchangeably over time. In the book of Exodus, Moses' father-in-law tells Moses that the work was too much, and Moses needs help and must train up other leaders. In the 18th chapter, Jethro points out to Moses that "the work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone."<sup>21</sup> But by training others to serve, Jethro explains to Moses, the load will be lighter, because it will be shared.<sup>22</sup> This is a story of Israel getting organized and can help us in our current situation.

Numbers picks up where the Exodus narrative leaves off. The 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Numbers opens with the people of God complaining about all their hardship. God had led the Israelites out of Egypt, kept them safe in the wilderness, and had provided food to sustain them, and the people complained! Understandably, Moses was frustrated and confessed to the Lord, "I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me."<sup>23</sup> Moses discovered that sharing the burdens with the people is necessary, and this narrative is an illustration of the differences between pastoral care and congregational care. In order to care for a congregation of people, a strategy must be organized and implemented. In response to Moses' cry, the Lord instructed Moses to identify seventy elders to help carry the burden of the people so that Moses would not have to carry it alone.<sup>24</sup> Moses brought together seventy elders and then "the Lord came down in the

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<sup>21</sup>Exodus 18:18

<sup>22</sup>Exodus 18:22

<sup>23</sup>Numbers 11:14

<sup>24</sup>Numbers 11:16-17

cloud and spoke with him, and he took of the Spirit that was on him and put the Spirit on the seventy elders.”<sup>25</sup>

Moses had the vision and his first lesson in leadership was to share it. While people are recipients of care, ministry is being done by the people. While people are called to care for others, it may be important to consider the type of care needed and provided. As a hospital chaplain, there were typically two types of care the chaplain would respond to: emergency calls and regular visits. Emergency calls consisted of paging the chaplain (we actually carried pagers); the chaplain responded within a short period of time to whatever kind of emergency was going on. The regular visits were ongoing and in other cases, as needed. At First Presbyterian, there are emergencies that require a pastoral visit as soon as possible, and then there are the ongoing visits which require attention, some as needed. Many of these needs may be addressed by the other members of the congregation, but there needs to be a plan in place.

First Presbyterian currently has an on-call schedule for pastoral emergencies, with our three pastors taking turns covering the weekends. The pastor on-call will take the phone calls and if necessary, meet, visit, pray, assist and be present with those in the midst of a crisis. The nature of the emergency may be a death, an accident, a hospitalization, surgery, personal crisis, family situation, or difficult situation which requires a pastoral presence. The on-call schedule has served our congregation well and has also allowed the pastors to protect their days off knowing the emergencies will be addressed by one of the other pastors.

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<sup>25</sup>Numbers 11:25

The ongoing care needs and those that arise but are not emergencies may be addressed by members of the congregation, with the people of the church caring for the people of the church. It is important to identify what the needs are and the best way to address these needs is to create a process. At First Presbyterian, the existing Board of Deacons has been trying to address some of the needs in the congregation. The deacons have had limited training and guidance, though they have provided care in the areas of support and prayer, writing cards and making phone calls to people who have been dealing with health problems or are homebound. Flowers are being delivered by deacons to encourage people and homemade soup is available to those who may benefit. The ministry provided by the deacons is invaluable and has been welcomed by the members of the church. The deacon model in place for the caring needs of our congregation serves as a springboard to a more extensive plan which will incorporate the needs which are not being addressed and met.

#### Caring for One Another

Ministry of presence is a favorite phrase of chaplains to describe their work - with or without words - to be an instrument of God's grace and God's love as they enter the waiting room, when a family is anticipating the worst or best news of their lives, or the hospital chapel, where a loved one is praying for a miracle. The ministry of presence is a way of being rather than a way of doing. This kind of caring can bring comfort to those who are hurting and can be done by anyone, ordained or non-ordained. One need only to be available and willing to serve as an instrument of God's incarnational presence.

In her book *The Ministry of Presence*, Winnifred Fallers Sullivan includes one definition of ministry of presence from the *Dictionary for Pastoral Care and Counseling*, which characterizes the practice:

The ministry of presence has come to mean a form of servanthood (diakonia, ministry) characterized by suffering, alongside of the hurt and the oppressed - a being, rather than a doing or a telling. The articulation or celebration of faith goes on within the individual or community that chooses these circumstances, but does so in the form of *disciplina arcani*, the “hidden discipline,” with no program of external testimony.<sup>26</sup>

The ministry of presence is not new and was practiced long before this kind of ministry was given a name. As mentioned earlier, in the book of Job three of his friends heard of Job’s adversity and went to his friend in need, to comfort him. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar “set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him (Job) and comfort him.”<sup>27</sup> When Job’s friends saw that Job was in great sorrow and distress, they wailed in grief and shock, tore their clothes, threw dust over their heads, and sat with him.<sup>28</sup> The ministry of presence sometimes looks like that: sitting with loved ones. Their hearts were broken, as was Job, and they sat with him, with no one speaking a word to him, “because they saw how great his suffering was”.<sup>29</sup>

Job’s friends identified with Job’s sorrow and joined in his grief, seeking to share the pain and caring for the needs of their friend. Ministry of presence is the work of the person who will tend to those in need, offering a helping hand, providing comfort, writing a sympathy note, delivering soup or flowers, ministering with others through our

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<sup>26</sup> Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *A Ministry of Presence: Chaplaincy, Spiritual Care, and the Law* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 178.

<sup>27</sup> Job 2:11

<sup>28</sup> Job 2:12-13

<sup>29</sup> Job 2:13

presence. By our presence, we do not eliminate sorrow or grief; rather we lighten the load by sharing the burden. This narrative from the book of Job is a reminder of what both Steinke and Creech point to in the life of a congregation: family members caring for one another, bearing one another's burdens, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. Job's friends caring for Job is an example of an emotional system at work and serves as a microcosm of a congregation caring for one another.

Stone argues that laity must be trained in caring for one another. He explains, "the training of laity in pastoral care methods is designed to answer fears, give skills and methods, heighten awareness of the task, and above all instill confidence and the conviction that even simple acts of caring are commissioned by God. It is a way to assist lay persons in becoming active responders to God's love and can provide an easily grasped means for unleashing their love of others."<sup>30</sup> Members of the congregation are then active responders in caring for the members of the congregation.

#### Caring for One Another in Recent Challenges

In light of the current coronavirus (COVID-19) situation, the best way we can care for one another is not by gathering in person and to participate in social distancing (defined by the CDC as remaining out of congregate settings and avoiding mass gatherings).<sup>31</sup> The church must be the church like never before, caring for one another and prayerfully considering what it means to practice hospitality in new ways. Loving and caring for our congregation and neighbors during this unsettling period requires that we shield the vulnerable from illness and to reach out to our brothers and sisters, to ensure they have systems in place for support that also limit their chances of infection.

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<sup>30</sup> Stone, 31.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

We need to connect regularly and often, by phone or internet, to remind them of Christ's love during these trying days.

Shane Berg, Professor and Executive Vice President at Princeton Theological Seminary, writes on the theology of social distancing and love of neighbor as a response to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 virus: "It is not fear or irrational caution that led the Seminary's leadership to put robust social distancing in place for our community. It is rather fidelity to Christ's charge to love our neighbors and care for the least of these that compels us. Serving the common good in this way, to be sure, calls forth a sacrifice from us. We choose to limit for a season our participation in certain forms of human community - which brings us so much life and joy - in order to preserve human life."<sup>32</sup> As we face the challenges and uncertainty brought by this pandemic, Berg reminds us all that social distancing is an act of Christian discipleship.

In order to take on congregational care in light of these recent challenges, let us consider best practices used in the past. As Christians, how have churches handled the plagues of the past? While all people of all faiths (and none) are facing COVID-19, it is worth remembering the approach Christians have adopted over time, beginning with Jesus' commandment to love your neighbor as yourself.<sup>33</sup> How do we care for one another in an intensely professionalized medical environment? The Presbyterian Disaster Assistance provides guidance on valuable, common-sense tips on what congregations and individuals can do to keep themselves safe in the midst of a pandemic. PDA Director Laurie Kraus calls for proactive leadership in the church: "It is important for faith

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<sup>32</sup>Shane Berg, "Social Distancing and the Love of Neighbor," Accessed March 12, 2020, <https://www.ptsem.edu/alerts/perspective-social-distancing-love-of-neighbor>.

<sup>33</sup>Matthew 22:39

leaders to proactively model protective health practices in congregational life, resist and renounce the racism and xenophobia at the virus' geographic point of emergence, and make sensible plans to support vulnerable and isolated members of their community.”<sup>34</sup>

First Presbyterian has a large component of the congregation that is vulnerable, namely the elderly. These members are living in assisted facilities, nursing homes, group homes, and living independently. The Florida Governor has banned nursing homes, assisted living facilities, long-term care facilities and similar sites across the state from accepting visitors (exception is end-of-life) in an effort to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus among some of the state's most vulnerable people. Furthermore, many are struggling with school closures and businesses, including bars, nightclubs, gyms and theaters, which is in compliance with guidelines from the Florida Department of Health, the Centers for Disease Control and Protection and the World Health Organization. How does the church continue to be the church when in-person worship services and all gatherings at the church have been suspended, and how does a congregation care for the members of the congregation during a pandemic? How do we ensure congregational care and support for ongoing community ministry? How can the church provide support to families if businesses and schools close? How will the church care for the homeless and the displaced due to economic disruptions in the community? How can churches (in our presbytery and in the community) work together to provide support to those affected?

#### The Waiting Room as a Non-Anxious Presence

It all starts in the waiting room. Steinke reminds us that “the presence of anxiety in the church is a given. That's life. Ignoring its alarm or treating it lightly is not a sign of

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<sup>34</sup>Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): Presbyterian Mission, “Coronavirus: Faith not fear,” March 3, 2020, <http://www.pcusa.org/pda.www.presbyterianmission.org/story/faith-not-fear-2/>



faith, much less wisdom.”<sup>35</sup> In times of high anxiety, the church must remain diligent in serving rather than corrupting the purpose of our bonding together - “for the sake of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).<sup>36</sup> In the waiting room, we meet people where they are, in all their messiness and confusion, in times of high anxiety, in fear and in hope, and in faithfulness that people are good and that people care for one another.

The chaplain enters the waiting room as a non-anxious presence. A family waits for the doctor to share the reality of what is going on with their loved one. As we wait, the family members share stories of what happened to the patient, where the family was when it happened, how they got to the hospital, why they need everything to be as normal as possible. We are forming a relationship of trust in the waiting room. At First Presbyterian, the trust has been building over the past year, with new pastoral leadership and staff support. Though the most recent crisis of COVID-19 is filled with fear and uncertainty as we look to the future, our members are counting on the care we give and receive from one another. We are in the waiting room and how we respond matters.

We start by meeting people where they are, hearing stories of worry and hope, even as Job’s friends cared for Job. Ministry of presence may be ironic in a time when the data suggests that what the world needs now is not our physical presence, but our absence. Dr. McCalley, professor at Wheaton College and a priest in the Anglican Church in North America, writes: “the pandemic forces the church as an institution to consider its role during a time of crisis. Many religious communities are suspending their typical operations. Are Christians abandoning their responsibility to the sick and

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<sup>35</sup> Steinke, xv.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

suffering?”<sup>37</sup> Today, the most effective ways of stopping the spread of the coronavirus is by social distancing (avoiding large gatherings) and washing our hands. Indeed, caring for one another depends on the context.

### A Place for Hospitality

The church’s job is more important than ever, to care for one another in small actions such as making a phone call or praying for our church, community and world. As McCalley writes, “the church’s absence, its literal emptying, can function as a symbol of its trust in God’s ability to meet us regardless of the location. The church remains the church whether gathered or scattered. It might also indirectly remind us of the gift of gathering that we too often take for granted.”<sup>38</sup>

Our counselor, Peter, challenges the community (and the church) to offer hospitality ungrudgingly.<sup>39</sup> Hospitality is not optional for Christians, and is not limited to those who are good at it. All are called to extend acts of hospitality to sisters and brothers. Christine Pohl, in her book *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, addresses the practical importance of caring for one another by explaining the meaning of hospitality: “one of the key Greek words for hospitality, *philoxenia*, combines the general word for love or affection for people who are connected by kinship or faith (*phileo*), and the word for stranger (*xenos*).”<sup>40</sup>

Pohl describes several aspects of care for persons including fellow Christians and the larger community: first, the message of providing shared meals is that of equal

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<sup>37</sup> Esau McCaulley, “The Christian Response to the Coronavirus: Stay Home,” March 14, 2020, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> 1 Peter 4:9

<sup>40</sup> Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1999), 31.

recognition and respect. Second, the gospel depends on the hospitality of others. Third, the early church regularly met for worship in the household of believers, helping “to foster family-like ties among believers and provided a setting in which to shape and to reinforce a new identity.”<sup>41</sup> During this pandemic, it may be time to return to the basics of what Pohl is describing, caring for one another by making hospitality central to Christian practice. Shared meals may not be possible due to social distancing, but equal recognition and respect are more important than ever. Sharing the gospel depends on the hospitality of others and how we practice this will determine the livelihood of the church. Finally, returning to worship in households online may be exactly what the church needs, reminding us of the gift of gathering that we too often take for granted.<sup>42</sup>

In his article, Dr. McCaulley closes with Jesus’ words to his disciples in the upper room before his death: “During this final discourse, he tells them that it is better that he goes away so that the comforter (the Holy Spirit) would come. The point is that the loss of his physical presence through his death, resurrection and ascension would lead to an even deeper communion with God. It is possible, that, strangely enough, the absence of the church will be a great testimony to the presence of God in our care for our neighbors.”<sup>43</sup> The truth of the words from John’s Gospel stands the test of time: the grass withers and the flowers fall, but God’s word stands forever and ever.<sup>44</sup> The church will continue to be the church, and people will continue to care.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>42</sup> Esau McCaulley, “The Christian Response to the Coronavirus: Stay Home,” March 14, 2020, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Isaiah 40:8

English poet John Donne wrote that “no man is an island,” arguing for the interconnectedness of all people with God. Donne’s “Meditation 17” is one of a series of essays he wrote when he was seriously ill in 1623, and one excerpt, in particular, has remained popular:

No man is an island,  
Entire of itself;  
Every man is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main.  
If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less,  
As well as if a promontory were.  
As well as if a manor of thy friend’s  
Or of thine own were.  
Any man’s death diminishes me,  
Because I am involved in mankind;  
And therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls;  
It tolls for thee.<sup>45</sup>

Donne was ill after almost dying from spotted fever in 1623 when he wrote this essay. He was 51 years old and the dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral when he fell gravely ill. His daughter was engaged to be married and Donne urged her to get married while he was in the hospital, so he would know that she would be taken care of, should he die. From his hospital room, “he listened to the church bells toll the news of weddings and of deaths from the epidemic around him”.<sup>46</sup> Donne’s words are a gentle reminder that no one suffers alone; and being aware of another’s pain only makes us stronger and more able to live. No man is an island is still true in 2020-21. Whether we gather physically together or not, we are interconnected, and COVID-19 is a wake-up call that to be ill is to

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<sup>45</sup> “No Man Is An Island – Poem by John Donne,” Accessed March 12, 2020, <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/no-man-is-an-island/>

<sup>46</sup> Meghan O’Rourke, “The Shift Americans Must Make to Fight the Coronavirus,” The Atlantic, March 12, 2020, <http://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/we-need-isolate-ourselves-during-coronavirus-outbreak/607840/>

know our interconnectedness. The pandemic gives us the opportunity to frame our anxiety and fear in the context of caring for one another. Though simple, it may be helpful to view telephone calls as a place for hospitality, as Pohl wrote two decades ago. “Given our high mobility and the numbers who live alone, phone calls now often sustain crucial human relationships. While it is certainly not the same as sharing a meal, a phone conversation with a weary or lonely person does represent welcoming someone into our lives. The conversation requires similar concentration, a similar setting aside of other things in order to give our attention to the other person. Phone calls, which so often seem like interruptions, can actually be an important way to care for one another.”<sup>47</sup>

A place for hospitality is born in the waiting room, where uncertainty, fear and hope all live together, waiting for the divine Doctor to show up. As stated earlier, the church is uniquely positioned to wait with one another, to care for and with one another, expecting God to show up and guide us. As the church represents the hands and feet of Christ, the community is uniquely positioned to care for one another “for such a time as this”.<sup>48</sup> As we sit with one another in our virtual waiting rooms, love (in action) begins with God’s grace and generosity. Pohl explains, “hospitality is not first a duty and responsibility; it is first a response of love and gratitude for God’s love and welcome to us. Although it involves responsibility and faithful performance of duties, hospitality emerges from a grateful heart.”<sup>49</sup> Our counselor, Peter, reminds us that if hospitality is not shared out of gratitude, it may be offered grudgingly.<sup>50</sup> Pohl points to Esther de Waal in her work on Benedictine spirituality, who suggested that at the end of all of our

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<sup>47</sup> Pohl, 168.

<sup>48</sup> Esther 4:14

<sup>49</sup> Pohl, 172.

<sup>50</sup> 1 Peter 4:9

hospitable activity, we are faced with two questions, “Did we see Christ in them? Did they see Christ in us?”<sup>51</sup>

#### CONCLUSIONS: FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

This is an emerging, rapidly evolving situation and also the appointed time to implement a congregational care plan. The pastor and researcher will need to carefully be informed by daily updates from the CDC, the state of Florida, and our denomination. Pastoral and congregational opportunities to stay connected with members and colleagues will be vital in equipping churches and worshippers with useful information and resources during these trying times. It is important during such a dynamic global event, that we, as the church, also take the time for an informed and thoughtful response, knowing too well that pandemics have occurred in the past and will undoubtedly happen in the future. Assessment of risks with available information in the context of congregational care and communicating the strategy will be paramount in maintaining and providing care and support for our congregation and community. We will continue to be the church; we will simply have to do that differently for a while, acting out of love and God’s peace, which passes all understanding.<sup>52</sup>

While I was serving as a hospital chaplain, it always seemed to me that God’s waiting room was always sacred; life was changing and lives were changed, transformed. Throughout history, the church has always been a place for changing lives. Richard Rohr says it best: “All transformation takes place here. We have to allow ourselves to be drawn out of business as usual and remain patiently on the threshold where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely. There alone our old world is left

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<sup>51</sup> Pohl, 173.

<sup>52</sup> Phil. 4:7

behind, while we are not yet sure of the new existence. That's a good space where genuine newness can begin."<sup>53</sup> Here can be the hospital, the church, our living rooms, and even on the phone; all transformation takes place here.

Our responsibility as Christians to love and care for one another is in spite of our humanness and limitations, and ministry is for all people in the church. With our biblical narratives and scholarly resources guiding us, congregational care is defined by the members of the church caring for the members of the church, with awareness and attention to the emotional systems in place and encouraging growth and health. We have a congregation with an aging population and are isolated due to a pandemic. As did Moses, I envision the sharing of leadership with the laity as crucial in reaching our members, who are not gathering in person. The laity will need organization and training, with special attention to best practices in the midst of our current situation. Everyone is affected by an invisible virus and we are all in this together. Caring for one another is more important than ever, and the question is how; this is the work of my research that follows.

#### CARING IN THE MIDST OF A PANDEMIC

“Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”<sup>54</sup> What does it mean to bear one another's burdens, let alone in the midst of a pandemic? Does this mean I lend a helping hand if I can? Paul's letter to the Galatians closes with this simple command and the answer to all the issues in the church at Galatia: bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.<sup>55</sup> This is a wonderful

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<sup>53</sup> Rohr, 155-156.

<sup>54</sup> Galatians 6:2

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

example for the church throughout history and this is both extremely easy and difficult. If we take a look at the example of Jesus, bearing one another's burdens looks like showing up when folks are hurt and confused. For some, that's easy unless we're in the middle of a pandemic; however, showing up for each other when things are messy and complicated is something many are uncomfortable doing, even in the best of times. As people and as a church, we like our ministries to be organized and predictable, without gray areas. The gospel invites us to consider living in the unpredictable zone, and this year we have, whether we like it or not.

In the early days of the pandemic, people around the world scrambled to make sense of an invisible germ that was causing havoc in our communities, in our churches, and across the globe. As leaders in the church, we pivoted to doing ministry in new and unprecedented ways. Early in March we were worshipping in our sanctuary and the next week we were worshipping online. We were hoping to hunker down for a short while in hopes to celebrate the Resurrection of our Lord... in person, with Easter lilies galore, the beautiful voices in our cathedral choir, with the people joining together announcing the good news:

Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia!  
Earth and heaven in chorus say, Alleluia!  
Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluia!  
Sing, ye heavens, and earth reply, Alleluia!<sup>56</sup>

The uplifting music was indeed sung and shared by our cathedral choir, though the recording was from the previous year and thus included in our livestreamed worship service on Easter Sunday. Though Easter was celebrated, the members of our

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<sup>56</sup>Charles Wesley, "Christ the Lord is Risen Today" in *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, (Louisville, Kentucky, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990).



congregation worshipped from their living rooms this year, as the pandemic has stretched from days into weeks and then into months. Indeed, the entire year has been dominated by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and many countries in the world (including the United States) are experiencing second or third wave of COVID-19 cases. Hope is on the horizon, however, as multiple COVID-19 vaccines are under development, with the first supply becoming available before the end of 2020.

Our current context beckons us to re-imagine what it means to carry each other's burdens and to care for one another as a church and as a community. It's too early to say how the COVID-19 outbreak will change the world, but it has already infected over 58 million people and killed over 1.35 million worldwide. In the United States, we have lost over 250,000 people due to COVID-19 and the number of coronavirus cases have surpassed 12 million.<sup>57</sup> North America is currently seeing a rise in new cases, and health workers and health systems are being pushed to the breaking point. Unemployment rate in the U.S. has risen to the levels not seen since the end of World War II.

As cases continue to increase rapidly across the United States, the CDC encourages people to celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas at home with the people you live with. Gatherings with family and friends who do not live with you can increase the chances of getting or spreading COVID-19 or the flu.<sup>58</sup> As my own family gathers for Thanksgiving, our two college students will be returning home, posing varying levels of risk. Celebrating virtually or with members of your own household (who are consistently

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<sup>57</sup>“Weekly Updates by Select Demographic and Geographic Characteristics,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed November 23, 2020, [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/covid\\_weekly/index.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/covid_weekly/index.htm).

<sup>58</sup>“Holiday Celebrations and Gatherings,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/holidays.html>.

taking measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19) poses the lowest risk for spread. We have been educated on how the virus spreads, and over the past few months we know that COVID-19 spreads easily from person to person between people who are in close contact with one another (within 6 feet), through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes, breathes, sings or talks. People who are infected but do not have symptoms can also spread the virus to others.<sup>59</sup>

In light of our current reality, the church has responded by adapting to worship and ministry opportunities, and as the situation continues to evolve, its leadership continues to evaluate what has worked and what has not worked. The church is not immune to the challenges surrounding the pandemic and has been realistic about what is possible by closely monitoring the recommendations by the federal, state, and local guidelines. Our church continues to grapple with re-opening and re-closing in-person gatherings as the pandemic persists. How do we bear one another's burdens as we move toward a hopeful response in the midst of uncertainty?

First Presbyterian has embraced opportunities presented by the pandemic, including feeding the hungry, making masks for our first responders and healthcare professionals, offering worship services and educational classes online, and providing devotions to our members and non-members alike. Following the way of Jesus has looked different this year, like delivering toilet paper or flowers on the porch of someone who is lonely and depressed. Our pastoral staff has had to be more intentional about taking the time to reach out to members of the community. Sometimes that has resulted in

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<sup>59</sup>“Symptoms of Coronavirus,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html>.

shedding a few tears or laughing out loud, serving as the hands and feet of Jesus for someone who needs a gentle reminder that God loves and cares for them. We are not that much different from the church at Galatia, as Paul admonishes the Galatians and us to bear one another's burdens.

Showing up for one another when life is hard has always been a way to help to carry one another's burdens, as we run this earthly race. Jesus has provided examples in the Gospels whereby showing up for his friends helped to ease their burdens. In John's gospel, Jesus got word that one of his friends was sick. Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha, was dying and even though Jesus did not come right away, he arrived too late. Lazarus was dead. Upon his arrival, Martha falls to Jesus' feet, crying, "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died."<sup>60</sup> In Martha's cry, we acknowledge the cries of every person who calls out to God for help, and one that is familiar today with the stories of deadly threats detailing the impact of COVID-19: stories about healthcare workers fighting to save lives and the stories of choir practices, weddings, and family gatherings turning into super-spreader events.

Jesus eventually goes to the place where Lazarus had been buried and wept, recorded in the shortest verse in the Bible: "Jesus wept."<sup>61</sup> Jesus wept because his friend, Lazarus was dead, and he understands how Martha and Mary are feeling. The community is weeping and so is Jesus. Right in the middle of tears and pain and sorrow is Jesus, who is not immune to the suffering we face. The vignette in John's Gospel is a moment in the ministry of Jesus which paints a picture of bearing one another's burdens.

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<sup>60</sup> John 11:21

<sup>61</sup> John 11:35

A nother moment in the gospels which bring to life the concept of bearing one another's burdens is found on the road to Emmaus. Luke tells the story that while the disciples were walking, they were talking about everything that happened, that is, the events of Holy Week. The walk to Emmaus may be described as a waiting room experience, where you have no idea what to do. You just got off the phone with the doctor and heard some unbelievable news. Your friend lost the battle to COVID-19. You lost your job. You don't know what to do. The disciples didn't know what to do, and a stranger asks, what are you talking about? We know this is Jesus, but at the time, the disciples didn't know who was asking the questions of Scripture. Indeed, we are called to care for even strangers and to be vulnerable even as we are cared for by those we don't know. Our medical professionals and patients have modeled this during the pandemic.

These are the waiting rooms in our lives, where we find ourselves waiting for doors to open, waiting for vaccines to be developed, waiting for vaccines to be distributed, waiting for movement, and waiting for the pain and confusion to end. Jesus showed up at a time when things seemed messy, and the road ahead was unclear. Life didn't make sense and Jesus showed up without judgment. He simply walked with them and fed them. This vignette in Luke's Gospel provides a picture of bearing one another's burdens in a broken and hurting world, when our lives have been turned upside-down and ministry looks different. Showing up is more complicated, and meeting with people in person may not even be possible, depending on the circumstances.

The pandemic has affected many people in different ways at different times. At various points in the pandemic, many of us have lost routines, jobs, vacations, and the ability to gather with others. Events have been cancelled, routines and schedules have

changed, and screens are universally accepted, used, adapted and embraced as a tool for communicating. Technology has kept us connected on one level, but we know the difference between in-person and digital interaction. As the weeks turned into months, fatigue has set in. How do we continue to bear one another's burdens and create and maintain connections? There have been debates over how and when to return to normal, but at the time of this writing, the numbers are going in the wrong direction.

While some have returned to school, workplace, and church, Jesus taught us to remember the least of these, remembering the most vulnerable among us. There are plenty who are not able to meet in person, such as the immunocompromised, the elderly, and others who cannot participate in group settings. Many have been impacted by job loss, health concerns, isolation and anxiety. How can we bear one another's burdens in these times of uncertainty? We must continue to serve those around us, both individually and as a church, with consideration of our time, health, and resources.

While many of my friends and relatives are hunkering down for long winter nights, south Floridians may benefit from the tropical climate. Winter in Florida is not like winter in Canada, and outdoor events are possible and may even be pleasurable. For example, our church conducted a drive-in Advent experience. In December 2020, we had a living nativity scene (including real animals)! Creative ministry opportunities, such as this Advent experience, are wonderful ways to stay connected and provide hope for those within the church and community.

While some will remain isolated and continue to experience a profound sense of loss, Jesus has reminded us that the Lord does not shy away from meeting us in our suffering. As we meet our brothers and sisters in the waiting rooms of life, how we

respond to them matters. As we bear one another's burdens, we meet people where they are, not where we are. When I walk into the waiting room (whether figuratively or literally), the focus is on the other. What is that person going through? We must meet people where they are, in the places where life doesn't make sense. In these difficult times, there will undoubtedly be some form of loss, and to acknowledge it is to miss the person.

In the church and beyond, it is appropriate to keep in our back pockets some words of lament. The conversation that includes words of lament acknowledges the reality in which we are living in. We are living in an already-but-not-yet era<sup>62</sup>, where we look towards a time when we can hug our friends and gather together with our families. Jesus met people where they were, and so must we. There are several types of psalms in the Bible that help us to understand our emotions, including praise and thanks, wisdom, and even lament. Some of the psalms are individual laments while others are communal. Both are vital because it helps us to articulate what we are feeling; they are cries to God, asking God to save us from our pain. These prayers are directed toward God and remind us that we are not alone. As we bear one another's burdens and care for others, we lament together and acknowledge who God is.

At First Presbyterian, we strive to be a caring community of faith, united by the Spirit of Christ and bound to one another in Christian love, while acknowledging who God is. The focus of care at First Presbyterian is to meet the needs of every member, and also to enable all members to be the hands and feet of Jesus Christ in a broken and hurting

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<sup>62</sup>This theological concept of already and not yet is referred to as kingdom theology.

world. The body of Christ is for the love of God and the love of human beings; that is, the common good for all.

Our ministry of caring is guided by the biblical mandate to care for one another: “I needed clothed and you clothed me, I was sick, and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”<sup>63</sup> Christians are identified by the caring they provide not only to those in the church, but beyond the body of Christ. During my tenure as a hospital chaplain, the focus was not only the physical ailments that brought our patients to the hospital, but also the mental, emotional and spiritual conditions. By listening and being attentive to the needs of our patients, the chaplain could then provide an assessment and develop practical interventions. This holistic perspective is part of what caring Jesus was describing in Matthew 25. Furthermore, caring is commanded in the Bible “to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>64</sup>

The biblical mandate to care for one another undergirds our congregational care ministry in the church, but not everyone has the same understanding of what it means to care. Henri Nouwen, a Catholic Priest, writer, and theologian, writes about the notion of care in his book *Out of Solitude*, with interests rooted primarily in psychology, pastoral ministry, spirituality, social justice and community. Nouwen helps us with the basic meaning of care, based on its roots, which means lament. In his book *Out of Solitude*, Nouwen writes, “the basic meaning of care is to grieve, to experience sorrow, to cry out

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<sup>63</sup> Matthew 25:36

<sup>64</sup> Luke 10:27

with.”<sup>65</sup> The Scriptures mandate to care for one another and what care looks like matters; it’s not just an attitude, but rather it’s standing in the gap with those who suffer.

The call to care, according to Nouwen, “is the privilege of every person and is at the heart of being human.”<sup>66</sup> We are invited to enter into someone’s life and sometimes in someone’s suffering. In *Healthy Caregiving*, Nouwen’s invitation is to be fully present to another person “with our intellect and our skills as well as our heart, our time and our listening ears.”<sup>67</sup> As Michelle O’Rourke writes (in company with Henri J. M. Nouwen), “we are encouraged to respond to the one who is suffering by recognizing their situation and stopping to consciously “be” with them, before we “do” anything about it.”<sup>68</sup>

Another consideration that Nouwen talked about is the difference between cure and care. While our culture and health care system often focus on cure, it can be difficult to know what to say to people who are living with difficult challenges that are not easily curable. We have the ability to care for one another, even when a cure is not possible. Sometimes our very presence is what is needed and can provide healing to that situation.<sup>69</sup> Healing can happen when the person feels cared for and listened to.

### The Challenges of Care in the Midst of a Pandemic

Caregivers have experienced some of these challenges of caregiving during the pandemic, due to physical limitations. We continue to deal with travel restrictions, fatigue, and the rising rate of infection of the virus. Some other challenges in general are emotional challenges, including anxiety, guilt, frustration and grief. Mental challenges may cause

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<sup>65</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Out of Solitude: Three Meditations on the Christian Life*. (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Marie Press, 2004), 37.

<sup>66</sup> Michelle O’Rourke, *Healthy Caregiving: Perspectives for Caring Professionals in Company with Henri J. M. Nouwen*. (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2020), 15.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.



caregivers to experience compassion fatigue<sup>70</sup>, depression and secondary trauma<sup>71</sup>. Furthermore, there are often times competing needs between work and family, moral distress, and financial limitations.

The spiritual challenges of caring for one another are worth pausing to remember that our faith gives us meaning and purpose in life. Our attitude affects other people as we care for one another. The perspective of the other reminds us that:

This may be a normal day at work for you  
But it's a big day in my life.

The look on your face and the tone of your voice  
Can change my entire view of the world.

Remember, I'm not usually this needy or scared.  
I am here because I trust you; help me stay confident.

I may look like I'm out of it,  
But I can hear your conversations.

I'm not used to being naked around strangers.  
Keep that in mind.

I'm impatient because I want to get the heck out of here.  
Nothing personal.

I don't speak your language well.  
You're going to do what to my what?

I may only be here for four days,  
But I'll remember you the rest of my life.

Your patients need your patience.

Anonymous<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Compassion fatigue is defined as “the natural consequence of stress resulting from caring for and helping traumatized or suffering people.” Dennis Portnoy, “Burnout and Compassion Fatigue: Watch for the Signs”, Journal of Catholic Health Association of the United States, July-August 2011.

<sup>71</sup> Secondary trauma is “the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person.” C. R. Figley, Compassion Fatigue: Coping with Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder in Those Who treat the Traumatized. Bristol, PA: Brunner/Mazel, 1995.

<sup>72</sup> O'Rourke, 83.

The advice from a patient may be adapted and adopted in other settings, including the church. The question is how we can make ourselves more aware of what our care receivers are feeling or needing.

Thankfully, in the church the congregation cares for one another; we don't do this alone. The pastor does not care for everyone by herself; the congregation is called to care for one another. The challenge is to equip others to share in the work, mobilizing more help and allowing others the opportunity to care for their brothers and sisters in Christ. Caring for others can provide opportunities for spiritual growth and transformation, both in the lives of those providing care and those receiving care. I myself have learned too many lessons to count from those I have cared for, and those lessons have informed how I think and who I have become. The challenge and charge before me are to develop a congregational care plan for First Presbyterian Church and equip the saints to care for one another in and around Fort Lauderdale.

#### ETHNOGRAPHY TO STUDY CONGREGATIONAL CARE

An ethnographic study is a way of immersing oneself in the life of a congregation in order to learn something about them and from them. Mary Clark Moschella, professor and author, describes ethnography as “a pastoral practice involves opening your ears and eyes to understand the ways in which people practice their faith.”<sup>73</sup> This method allowed the researcher to ask people to share their stories, thereby allowing the researcher to create a narrative of the congregation, with respect to congregational care. This research method is a good fit for the pastor looking at how the congregation can care for one another and the wider community. Furthermore, how can the members of First

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<sup>73</sup> Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction*, (The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, Ohio, 2008), 4.

Presbyterian begin to respond in more faithful and prophetic ways to the living human web(s) of life both within and beyond the local community?<sup>74</sup> The focus here is the whole flock, not just the individual sheep, lost or found. In addition, this pastoral practice is contextual.

In the heart of Fort Lauderdale, First Presbyterian is shaped by family and faith stories from members and the community all around us. By allowing the people to articulate their stories, the themes and longings are brought forth to light and the pastoral leaders gain more understanding about the life of the community. Learning more about the culture, its history with all its strengths and weaknesses, one can see the way forward to care for one another in a broken and hurting world.

Benefits of the congregation using the ethnographic study is that the participants are being heard and listened to, without judgment. The conversation allows the space and time to articulate values and concerns. Furthermore, the pastoral leaders get to know the members other than saying hello on Sunday mornings or wishing a member a very happy birthday. Open-ended questions allow the participants to speak freely and to share what's on their minds and in their hearts.

The pandemic has restricted our in-person meetings, and therefore, the interviews were done via Zoom.<sup>75</sup> Video conferencing made it possible for me to pursue my research while working from home and at the same time to connect with the participants in engaging ways. As the novel coronavirus spread around the world, people have

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 5. (Though the term 'living human web' was not discussed in Clinical Pastoral Education when I was going through my 4 units of CPE, it is an expansion of Anton Boisen's concept of 'living human documents'.

<sup>75</sup>Zoom is a communication solution that allows people to stay in contact with each other via video conferencing features.

discovered that being present via Zoom is serving as a satisfactory way of being present even though absent. Zoom is flexible and one-on-one meetings allow people to collaborate effectively; the one-on-one meetings feel personal and engaging. Another benefit of Zoom is that video call recording can be captured for future reference.

Members of the congregation were selected as much as possible to represent different demographics of the church: old, young, long-time, new member, engaged, uninvolved, and with diverse backgrounds. Fifteen members were invited to participate in the study, and all agreed. Participants were informed that their participation is voluntary, and they knew in advance that the interviews would take approximately an hour. They were told what the results would be used for, towards the goal of developing a congregational care plan for First Presbyterian. The results may be shared with other churches in the Presbytery, and churches in other denominations may be interested. The researcher has agreed to keep the participants names confidential and anonymous.

All but two were interviewed via Zoom, while two members talked on the phone. Each and every person who was interviewed expressed sincere appreciation in being selected to participate in this study. All participants expressed feeling honored to be interviewed and included in my research and appreciated the opportunity to be part of the plan for congregational care, an additional benefit not expected by this researcher.

Though Moschella points out the value of using ethnography as a form of pastoral listening, I can attest that people felt heard, because they told me as such. Doing this type of research allowed me to show first-hand that I want to know the members of the congregation more deeply, and I value their stories. This is a wonderful example of caring for one another: listening more deeply and getting to know people more. While

the research process itself can spark growth and personal and communal self-awareness, may the congregation move towards a more comprehensive plan for caring for one another at First Presbyterian and the community at large.

At first, I wondered how I would remember what people said and who said what, but the recording function on Zoom alleviated those worries. All participants agreed to having the interview recorded. In addition, I made notes from the field during and after the interviews, and then wrote up the notes in a journal. Since we were using the Zoom platform, the physical setting was of little importance and I was able to focus on the people and interactions, reading nonverbal communication (though not in-person), which was evident on video. People shared all kinds of stories, some that highlight the good in our congregation, and others that see the gaps and challenges in the church.

While the participants all know me as one of their pastors, I wanted to address, in advance, the potential challenge of being both researcher and pastor while interviewing members of the church. Prior to the interviews, I asked our two other pastors if they would be available for pastoral care should the need arise during my interviews; they agreed. This was shared in advance with all the participants, and everyone seemed to understand and was comfortable with how to resolve the tension should it arise. I am not aware of any tensions at the time, and the questions asked allowed me to get to know the participants more fully; in that sense, the relationship between pastor and member was strengthened.

#### Stories Told in a Pandemic

I walked into the virtual waiting room and time stopped. My virtual background reminds me of the wind softly blowing through the palm trees, with the waves hitting the

sand. The sky is decorated with a few puffy clouds and I can smell the salty air. The waiting room provides a space to consider the what-ifs in life. We are present with one another. The waiting room is a place where the participants can share stories of the church, some that go back decades, others recent. The life story of the congregation is being painted and told by the characters in the narrative. Some are retired, others are professionals or students; married and single; long-time and new members.

As an Associate Pastor for Congregational Care at First Presbyterian, I have gotten to know the members through a variety of interactions such as personal crises, ministry teams, and meeting people in their various life stages. Through the interviews, however, I have learned more about the church's history and how the members are woven into the congregation. This will be helpful in developing a congregational care plan, which will be presented to the ruling elders for their consideration. (The Session is the council for the congregation and is composed of ruling elders, and is responsible for governing the congregation and guiding its witness to the sovereign activity of God in the world so that the congregation is and becomes a community of faith, hope, love and witness.)<sup>76</sup> In seeking to help the congregation grow in its capacity to care for one another, the Session will ultimately discern how the Spirit of God may be at work in the congregation and in the broader community. Therefore, it is important to understand the congregation in all matters and where the gaps are in order to address them.

The participants answered six questions about caring and questions related to caring for the congregation.<sup>77</sup> Caring for one another is not only a role I play; rather we

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<sup>76</sup> Presbyterian Church USA. Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, Part II: Book of Order 2019-2023 (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2019), G-3.0201 [p. 48], [https://www.pcusa.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/2019-23-boo-elec\\_010621.pdf](https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/2019-23-boo-elec_010621.pdf).

<sup>77</sup> Appendix contains survey questions.

are called to care for one another. While I served as a hospital chaplain for ten years prior to coming to First Presbyterian, my current role not only includes pastoral care; it also acknowledges the fact that I cannot do it alone and as Christians, bearing one another's burdens is not optional. A well-conceived and implemented plan and structure will allow and equip people to serve and use their particular gifts and talents within the congregation and the larger community.

While people undoubtedly have an idea about what caring means, the particular context allowed participants to talk about what it means to be a caring church, with examples. We began with where we are, by asking the question "Is First Presbyterian a caring church? Why or why not?" Overwhelming responses pointed to the affirmative, given the evidence that there is a plethora of opportunities to serve, such as Habitat for Humanity, prayer ministry, and filling Thanksgiving baskets for the community. Several participants mentioned the wide variety of ways one may serve by caring for people in need in the community and caring for one another within the congregation. Many members come from multi-generational families, inherently bringing strong ties to the church and to other members. In and of itself, it was noted that participation in a church promotes friendships over the years and leads to caring for others. One long-time member describes First Presbyterian as one big family and it has a hometown feeling, even for a large urban church.

Though the responses surrounding this question were overwhelmingly positive, there was some uncertainty about whether or not we care for those who are new to the church, whether new members or visitors. One participant confessed that it was hard to integrate into the congregation as a new member. As an introvert, the participant did not

feel that First Presbyterian was a caring church at first, but after getting involved, felt cared for by the other members. The participant speculated, saying that part of the difficulty was that we've had a lot of transitions within the pastoral team, which caused a lot of changes in the congregation.

While the majority of feedback surrounding this question was positive, a participant questioned if we care enough. We are loving people, the participant asserted, but wasn't sure we care enough, pointing to the fact that there is always room to grow and the study is needed. In other words, what are we doing well and where are the gaps?

Focusing in on the current context, participants were asked about how we care for the needs of this congregation in the midst of a worldwide pandemic. Though the spread of the coronavirus in the community has created challenges, the responses were encouraging and provided hope for both the researcher and the participants! Many are very appreciative of the extra efforts to provide connection for our members who are vulnerable and isolated, by livestreaming our worship services every Sunday and offering daily/weekly devotionals. One participant who has been livestreaming throughout the pandemic mentioned that s(he) misses communion, and since then, worshippers now have the opportunity to partake the meal from home.

The importance of the congregational care phone calls, which have been made by the elders and deacons throughout the pandemic, was highlighted as a way to care for our members throughout these challenging times. Theoretically, each member of the church has been contacted to see how he/she is doing and if there are any needs. The effort by our lay leaders to reach out to our members have been noticed and appreciated, thereby providing the pastors with information about any concerns.



Most everyone mentioned the enormous efforts by First Presbyterian who made masks for our first responders and healthcare professionals in the community. It was a collaborative effort fueled by the love and care for others, and thanks to the people, resources and funding, masks were delivered to more than 13,960 heroes fighting against an invisible and deadly virus. These masks are being used in nearly every hospital in Broward County, and more than a dozen police stations, fire departments and all Broward Sheriff Offices. In addition, all of our members 65 years of age and older received a mask, made by the Mask Response Team which consisted of more than 250 multi-generational volunteers. First Presbyterian led this important outreach in Broward County during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing care for not only the congregation, but also the surrounding community.

It was obvious during the interviews that the Zoom platform allowed me to do my research in the midst of a pandemic, and in doing so, it also allowed us to reflect on the benefits of technology during this challenging time and in the context of caring for our congregation. It was noted that even people who migrated up north during the summer joined our Zoom meetings and gatherings, allowing members to stay connected and providing community for many who are isolated. In addition to providing community, the opportunity to grow spiritually is important, as one participant shared: "I feel cared for because I can grow." Bible studies and prayer meetings which have been offered prior to the pandemic in-person are now virtual; some are able to join a particular ministry because they are offered virtually, eliminating a long drive and saving time. It was noted that the pandemic has forced us to think about how to do ministry in the future; indeed, it has.

While the pandemic has its own challenges, perhaps we have been afforded the time and space to consider what the gaps are in congregational care. Grateful for their honesty, the participants willingly shared their concerns about the gaps in caring for one another within our church and in the community. More than one member expressed their concerns about the difficulty in finding out about hospitalizations due to HIPAA. The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 is a federal law that required the creation of national standards to protect sensitive patient health information from being disclosed without the patient's consent or knowledge.<sup>78</sup> Though HIPAA is not new, one member remembers a time when hospitals used to notify the church when a patient (and member of the church) became hospitalized. This is not the case today; furthermore, families and members do not always let the church know about illnesses, hospitalizations and emergencies, making it difficult for pastors to respond. In addition, new members and visitors may not know who to contact with an emergency. An example was shared about a recent death during the pandemic, and the family complained that no one from the church had called.

Several participants wondered how new members and visitors are getting connected to the fellowship of our congregation. With fewer opportunities to greet and meet in person, it is necessary to be creative in maintaining connection amongst our membership. For example, the membership team is holding Zoom fellowship meetings with our newest members to welcome them and to get to know one another. However, continued care is of the utmost importance to maintain relationships and assist our newest members to get connected using their particular gifts and talents. In addition, several

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<sup>78</sup>“Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA),” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed November 24, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/phlp/publications/topic/hipaa.html>.

participants were concerned that the church should be focusing on youth and young families, pointing to the need for evangelism as a way to care for others in the community.

Some of the gaps in congregational care were expressed as hope and dreams for our church with respect to caring for the congregation and community. First Presbyterian is uniquely positioned in the heart of Fort Lauderdale and should be more prominent in the community at large, some argued. More involvement in the community, especially with the homeless population in Broward County, was echoed by several long-time members. For the newest members, it was noticed that it is difficult to assimilate into the congregation, and they are hoping that everyone feels welcomed and embraced. While First Presbyterian has a lot of institutional memory, one participant believes it is time to try new things and involve the community with ministry opportunities. An example is the blood drive, which is held every two months, and is especially important during these times of COVID-19 with the request for plasma to provide assistance for critically ill patients with the coronavirus (and other diseases).

In addition to addressing the needs of the congregation and community, the church is involved in caring for its members in all seasons of their lives. In order to get to know and care for one another, we need to share and hear each other's stories. One participant explained: "I have a great love for First Presbyterian Church. It was at first intimidating; I didn't feel like I belonged. But now I belong. I have something to offer. This church pushed me beyond myself."

A common theme is their hope to stay relevant in our community and society, by feeding hungry people and building houses, caring for our congregation and beyond. A

caring church is a church that is there for you when you are struggling. Staff members and lay leaders need to be approachable, offering comfort, listening and praying for our congregation. The church is also there for good times! It's all about the people and our attitudes, and this must be contagious and spill over into the community. A participant illustrates by pointing out that one of our beloved members, Maxine, died this past year; she was an example of caring for one another, not only by caring for those in our congregation but also in the community. This 87-year-old woman was a picture of grace and love, and was seen all over town visiting the sick, the lonely, the bereaved and those in need. Maxine had an incredible capacity to reach out and care for her neighbor, even when she was dealing with her own health issues. Her legacy for caring for the congregation and community has raised the bar for how to care for one another.

It was noted that in a big church, the leadership has more duties and responsibilities, and often the one-on-one relationships are left to the lay leaders. But our church members often expect a pastoral visit in the hospital, not only the sick but when babies are born! In addition, the homebound expect home communion, a ministry providing care to those who desire not only the sacrament, but a pastoral visit. When there is an emergency with one of our members, a pastor should be available.

One common thread expressed by the participants is the importance of listening. Pastors have to listen and must be believable. Valuing and sharing stories is a way of caring for one another. Good listening skills allow people to feel in their hearts that the other really cares; we listen and relate to people's stories and see the common threads and commonalities as human beings. As one participant described, "listening to other people's needs to support and encourage their growth is of the utmost importance."

When asked about how participants perceive the care pastors provide, people felt connection with a former pastor because he had a huge and approachable heart and had some good listening skills. However, some were quick to point out that previous pastors in times of transition could not build relationships, which led to a lack of connection. The bottom line is that caring and providing care is the pastor's job, though the elders and deacons can help. While it seems that First Presbyterian expects a lot from its pastors, several participants pointed out that if they ask, the people will help.

#### A Congregational Care Plan for First Presbyterian Church

The participants were asked about the ideal care plan for First Presbyterian and the overwhelming majority pointed to leadership. One participant and a long-time member believes that it all comes down to a deep trust for the pastors, explaining that “they [the leadership] navigate peace and a non-anxious presence by example and the ability to charter the ship (church) in rough waters.” A strong sense was shared by several participants that First Presbyterian (referring to the leadership) needs to keep our finger on the pulse, both in the congregation and community.

One participant contemplates what the plan for care might look like, and that requires a process and structure for congregational care, including tracking and recording of meetings, with those who are leading teams on staff and Session. With processes and structures in place, we can then focus on the importance of personal touch. The participant further explains that when there is a crisis, it is important to adapt and respond to the needs at hand. While there are many restrictions during the pandemic, the way we treat people matters, and that requires everyone to think outside the box. A nother participant encourages everyone to be involved in doing ministry, using one's gifts and

talents for the greater good. A big plan, for sure, but as this member adds, “I don’t want anybody to miss out!”

Prior to the pandemic, pastors fielded questions such as “my mother is lonely; would you be able to visit her?” or “Could we have lunch next week?” Lately, many of the questions include when, which are harder to answer: “When can we gather together at the assisted living facility?” or “When will things go back to normal?” In the waiting rooms of life, many of us have our own when questions right now, and while we may not know the answers, the structures and processes for congregational care can be addressed and adapted during the pandemic. We do not know what the future holds, but we know who the future holds; so we begin with a prayer for confidence in God’s goodness and mercy, which comes from Psalm 118:

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;  
His steadfast love endures forever!...  
The Lord is my strength and my might;  
He has become my salvation...  
I shall not die, but I shall live,  
And recount the deeds of the Lord...  
Open to me the gates of righteousness,  
That I may enter through them  
And give thanks to the Lord.  
Psalm 118:1,14,17, and 19<sup>79</sup>

Currently, First Presbyterian has a wonderful Board of Deacons providing care for our members. Members who are homebound are assigned to a deacon, who reaches out to the member in a variety of ways depending on the situation. Many in-person visits were welcome prior to the pandemic, but new ways of staying connected have changed. All deacons have access to our database with contact information for members, and recently the deacons have been given access to include notes about interactions made. This

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<sup>79</sup>Psalm 118: 1, 14, 17, 19

process allows staff members to view the interactions and provides updates on the status of our most vulnerable members of the church. This is a new process which was created during the pandemic and will be helpful to build upon.

When the coronavirus interrupted our in-person gatherings in March 2020, one of the processes which was created was to request all active elders and deacons to reach out to all the members of the church. Congregational care call lists were created and assigned to our elders and deacons. The lay leaders have been making phone calls throughout the pandemic and have included notes about the interactions of members in the database. This ministry of reaching out to our members has been an important way of staying connected and obtaining updates on how our people are doing. In the midst of a pandemic, we have created an opportunity for caring for our congregation.

What I have learned is that we have people who were not connected even prior to the pandemic. Reaching out to them has been a wonderful way of saying “I care about you” and “How would you like to get involved?”. The long-term benefit of getting to know people is the value of feeling cared for and included. This requires intentionality and is now incorporated into a way for caring for our members, not just in times of crises. In addition to having the elders and deacons checking in on our people, the members in the congregational care groups may benefit from getting to know one another and checking on each other. This may be the perfect time to build connection and community and to redefine what we mean by gathering. If people in these groups get to know one another, we are providing the congregation with emotional support as well as a sense that we are all in this together, even if we have to practice social distancing. The key may be to spread out the responsibility. We can put into place a way for the members to quickly

inform the pastor if someone is in crisis, while at the same time empowering members to care for one another and check in with those who may be isolated. When the pandemic is over, we will have new friendships and relationships formed because of the way we have stayed connected.

Caring for one another during the pandemic may not be that different than before, but perhaps the restrictions have forced us to consider what the needs are. What are the physical needs? How is the mental health of our members? What is needed? What can we offer? Traditionally, we have used the worship services to connect with our members. Meeting our people face-to-face gives us an opportunity to listen to their concerns and even observe nonverbal cues that help us assess their well-being and spiritual health. If someone is absent for a couple of weeks, we may pick up the phone to uncover a personal issue. When we are unable to assemble, how do we know about the needs and how do we organize our resources to meet those needs?

#### Members Caring for One Another

In order to avoid overloading the leadership (staff and lay leaders), teams must be built. Jethro's advice to Moses to delegate responsibility is appropriate in these times.<sup>80</sup> This uncertain time is a good opportunity for leaders to articulate to members that we need to look out for each other. If members are not connected to some kind of small group such as Bible study group, prayer group, ministry team, support group, or class, they may not feel cared for by the church. The deacons have created a list of the most vulnerable in our congregation, including the shut-ins, the elderly, especially those who do not have family living nearby, and members in nursing homes or long-term care

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<sup>80</sup>Exodus 18:13-26



facilities. However, some in our congregation have faced particular challenges due to the pandemic, such as loss of jobs, serious illness and long-term consequences from COVID-19, death in the family, and struggling with depression and/or anxiety.

Existing small groups such as adult Bible classes, committees, youth ministry and children's ministry may already be organized to care for the needs of the participants. What is needed is recruitment and organization of the leaders of these groups who can be responsible for keeping in touch and staying connected with members in their group. If the group is large, then dividing it into smaller groups will make the work more manageable. Members not in any of the existing ministry groups should be identified and put into groups of manageable size. Potential leaders from within the congregation should be identified for reaching out to these members.

Our deacons have asked how frequently our members should be contacted. While there may be extenuating circumstances, once every couple of weeks for most people is appropriate. Some may need more frequent contact. The leader of each group is encouraged to equip the members to stay in touch with each other. Some may want to provide ways to meet virtually, such as Zoom meetings, or opportunities for safe gatherings. Getting to know one another may be built into the beauty of this structure, as our members care for one another and form relationships and friendships. In addition, the group leaders will need encouragement as well. Elders and deacons have their own responsibilities and duties in ministry and will need to commit to the importance of this ministry within our congregation.

## STRATEGY FOR A CONGREGATIONAL CARE PLAN

Currently our Session is made up of 21 active elders who oversee the ministry areas of Finance, Spiritual Formation (adult education, youth and children), Worship and Music, Personnel, Mission, Membership, and Congregational Nominating Committee. In order for the elders and deacons to reach out to group ministry leaders, I propose a new elder for Congregational Care, who will oversee, support and encourage the elders, deacons and group ministry leaders. This is a huge responsibility but with the right kind of support and participation, congregational care will be a significant benefit for the members of First Presbyterian. If the value of congregational care is not represented on the Session, then the structure of the governing body may need to be addressed. The structure needs to represent the expressed values of the participants interviewed in this research. The members say that congregational care is important, but at this time, there is not an elder for congregational care with a vote at the table.

While listening to the participants in the study, I could not help but notice that we have some very caring individuals and have invested deeply in the life of First Presbyterian Church. The members want to help and care for one another in the church and in the community. This research has highlighted the need for direction and guidance in how to care for one another in changing times. In a recent study on how to help pastors lead thriving churches by guiding them to focus vision, strategy, team and action, a survey was done to assess to what extent churches are embracing digital strategies. Even though churches are returning to in-person services, most people are primarily engaging

with churches online.<sup>81</sup> Are we dedicating a team of staff and/or volunteers responsible to connect with people who are outside the church (and outside the faith)? How are our congregants engaging with digital content? How do we care for people we don't even know? While we have contact information for our members, we don't know many who are worshipping online and therefore, we are unable to reach out personally. This is a wonderful opportunity to develop a strategy to connect with people who are curious about our church, one that shows that we care about our community, and which forces us to rethink the boundaries of the church, both local and universal.

In her book *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World*, Deanna Thompson shares her own conversion story how an online social network connected people who have serious health concerns with those who care about them. In her early 40's, Thompson was dealt with a stage IV cancer diagnosis and a grim prognosis for the future. In order to update family and friends, she joined an online social network called CaringBridge, and soon thereafter, family, friends and even strangers signed up to receive updates. Not only did participants receive updates, but they also responded with e-mails, cards, packages, and calls from people all over the world. What surprised Thompson was not that people cared, but through virtual connectedness via a website, she was cared for by what she describes as "a cloud of witnesses greater than any I could have previously imagined".<sup>82</sup> The cloud of witnesses for her embodied Christ in powerful and new ways.

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<sup>81</sup> "How Churches are Embracing Digital Ministry Strategies," The Unstuck Group, accessed November 24, 2020, <https://hello.blackbaud.com/rs/053-MXJ-131/images/FB-2020-Q3-LP-RP-Church-Engagement-11770.pdf>.

<sup>82</sup> Deanna Thompson, *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 3-4.

One of the most powerful examples is that Thompson's willingness to be vulnerable with the online community somehow encouraged vulnerability and compassionate care from others, including the care she received from a colleague of hers:

I received an e-mail from this colleague in which she told me about her growing up in Israel as an agnostic Jew and how she often felt on the outside of religious practices like prayer. Reading my postings about my own struggles to pray following the diagnosis, she told me that she became inspired to start praying. Not long after she began praying, she led a group of students to study abroad in Israel. She told me about the group's day at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, where she and another Jewish colleague of mine placed prayers for me into the cracks of the wall. She wrote about how moved she was to see several of our students add their prayers for me to the wall as well. She then recounted for me that in every church the group visited, she would get down on her knees and pray to Jesus for a favor: to heal her friend with cancer. Her message to me ended with this: "I hope I didn't offend Jesus – after all, I'm a Jew and I don't even pray regularly – and there I was, asking Jesus for a favor. I think he'll be ok with that, won't he?"<sup>83</sup>

We have embraced virtual worship services and are grappling with the consequences of the coronavirus crisis and how it is impacting the church. In these challenging times, we too have witnessed humans caring for one another in the name of compassion and hope for the healing of the world. How we do that matters. Perhaps the virtual spaces are waiting rooms to help show love and care in the lives of those who suffer. While participants in the church are most familiar with the needs of their own members, we are connected by the Spirit of Christ even as we pray for and care for one another. The challenge is to stay connected with both each other and the church.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

## Building Trust, Building Relationships

My first paying job was to teach swim lessons. I was a young, eager 11-year-old and wanted desperately to build trust with the children and parents. The parents entrusted their precious babies to a pre-teen instructor, and I wanted to prove to all that they can trust me. The kids would learn to swim over time, safely and without too much fear. That required skills, a non-anxious presence, and a willingness to care for the other in a way that both parents and children would feel comfortable enough to come back the next day. Our members are longing for trust in the leaders of the church as we charter rough waters. Bridges and Bridges, consultants and authors on change, write in their book on *Managing Transitions*: “There are two sides to trust: the first is outward-looking and grows from a person’s past experiences with that particular person or group; the second is inward-looking and comes from the person’s own history, particularly from childhood experiences.”<sup>84</sup> The authors explain that the technique is very simple: start being trustworthy.<sup>85</sup>

With the possibility of one or more COVID-19 vaccines becoming available before the end of the year, some may long for the way we used to do things. There are new demands and workflows have changed, but time makes many things clear.<sup>86</sup> We do know that the pandemic has triggered many changes in the church and in the world, and how we respond will determine how the members of the church and the community will feel cared for. Congregational care plans across denominations may do well to incorporate in their toolboxes what the chaplains do best: the ministry of presence. The

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<sup>84</sup> William Bridges with Susan Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*, (Boston, MA: DeCapo Press, 2016), 119.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Bridges and Bridges, 104.

phrase is used by chaplains from many religious traditions in a variety of contexts, including hospitals, prisons and universities. In *A Ministry of Presence: Chaplaincy, Spiritual Care, and the Law*, a Jewish chaplain summarizes the ministry of presence as follows: “Words do not have to be said – giving a bottle of water to a thirsty person speaks volumes about not being forgotten. Maintaining a calm presence at the bedside does not remove fear; it lessens isolation. To be with a person at a time of need is to honor the survivor’s humanity, the inherent dignity endowed by the Creator. Teaching others how to be present, and how to listen to those in distress is a divine-like intervention that spreads the safety net of care and concern.”<sup>87</sup> As another chaplain said, “We are there to be there.”<sup>88</sup> Today we are re-defining what it means to be there.

Being there for the members of the congregation and community requires the leaders of the church to be there, by being present with all the uncertainties in the face of suffering. Standing in the gap where there are no answers calls for patience, compassion, and faithfulness to the value of the human being in front of you.<sup>89</sup> As the church, we are called for such a time as this.<sup>90</sup> In these swirly times of a worldwide pandemic, perhaps God has put us on the earth at this time (2020) and has placed us where we are and with the people we are with for a purpose.

One of the aspects of the newness of the pandemic and its consequences is the impact of how we are reaching out to others, within the church and beyond. No one is immune from the invisible germ, which has made its way around the world in a short

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<sup>87</sup> Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *A Ministry of Presence: Chaplaincy, Spiritual Care, and the Law*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 176.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>90</sup> Esther 4:14

period of time. Certain populations face different levels of exposure and implications. For example, we have had close to 20 deaths within the congregation since the pandemic began, and the majority of the families have not held memorial services or funerals yet. There have been no bereavement receptions which typically would follow the memorial service for our members of our congregation. In response, our church will be offering a grief support group with a special session during the holidays called Surviving the Holidays.<sup>91</sup> As we provide support for those who are grieving, the online platform allows our members to talk about their losses in community and also serves as an outreach to the community.

One of the ministries offered by First Presbyterian Church in the past is the Stephen Ministry program, through which members were trained and organized to help provide Christian caregiving to other members of our congregation. These ministers are people with special gifts for caring who use their gifts to bring Christ's love to those in need. They have gone through many hours of training to provide Christian care to those experiencing a life crisis or challenge. Stephen Ministers are caring Christian friends who listen, understand, accept, and pray for and with care receivers who are working through a crisis or a tough time. Trust is essential to a caring relationship, with confidentiality as an important principle, as what a care receiver tells his or his Stephen Minister is kept in strictest confidence. Stephen Ministers may be part of our congregational care plan in the future, as the program has recently started to offer online training.

Doing research in the midst of a pandemic has beckoned me to reflect on not only the questions and answers put forth, but on the experience of how the research has

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<sup>91</sup> GriefShare is a friendly, caring group of people who will walk alongside those who are going through the grieving process. GriefShare is a ministry of Church Initiative.

impacted my relationships with the people in the study. While my research and writing were underway long before the coronavirus made its way into my project, the participants joined my research after COVID-19 became part of our dinnertime talk. In my own life, my roles as a pastor, chaplain, teacher, mother, wife, daughter, sister and friend have allowed me to learn about providing as well as receiving care. I have also had the privilege to experience over 10 years in ministry, dedicated to pastoral care and chaplaincy. Many interactions between minister and patient/parishioner have formed who I am becoming, teaching me the things of life and death, weeping and laughing, persevering and sometimes wanting to give up, yet wanting to stay with others in the waiting room. The privilege of being in one's living room on a Zoom platform when everyone else was hunkering down at home was a gift. It was stunning to observe hope on the participants' faces, eager to share their deepest longings and looking expectantly into the future.

At the same time, I have witnessed how these children of God have experienced pain and suffering, all the while carrying the burdens of caring for others. Some are tired. All are clinging to our one true hope, hope in the Lord. We don't have to look too far:

- o For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.<sup>92</sup>
- o ...many are saying to me, "There is no help for you in God." But you, O Lord, are a shield around me, my glory, and the one who lifts up my head. I cry aloud to the Lord, and he answers me from his holy hill. I lie down and sleep; I wake again, for the Lord sustains me.<sup>93</sup>
- o I can do all things through him who strengthens me. In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup>Romans 8:24-25

<sup>93</sup>Psalms 3:2-5

<sup>94</sup>Phil. 3:13-14



- o But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.<sup>95</sup>
- o So, if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.<sup>96</sup>

### Observations on Ethnography and Storytelling

Spending time with the participants and members of the church allowed us to get to know one another. Throughout the interviews, I was listening and hearing for the movement of the Spirit, by allowing the participants to share what is closest to their hearts. This required me to be fully present to them – with my head and heart, my skills, my time and my listening ears. I noticed right away (with my first participant) that my attitude would create a climate of trust and safety. One participant confessed that s(he) was nervous about her answers and was worried that s(he) didn't have much to offer. At the same time, I wasn't sure I would know how to convince the participant to continue to feel comfortable in sharing, or even sharing at all. Allowing them to voice their experiences without judgment helped us to establish our relationships.

The experience of holding the interviews online felt, somehow, sacred. Frozen in time on a screen and being present though absent allowed us to become vulnerable and to come close to one another, through our virtual platform. Perhaps this type of interaction would come close to what Henri Nouwen would call compassion: “The word compassion is derived from the Latin words *pati* and *cum*, which together mean to suffer

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<sup>95</sup>Isaiah 43:1-2

<sup>96</sup>Col. 3:1-2

with. Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish... Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human.”<sup>97</sup> When we act with compassion, we acknowledge and aim at understanding the person and experience of the other. Though virtual, the interviews afforded both the researcher and the participant the opportunity to be fully present to one another. It is in the ethnographic study that the potential for mutual transformation was brought to light.

Serving as a hospital chaplain in a clinical setting, healing of the body, mind and spirit was very much at the forefront for the providers of care, whether physically or emotionally. The World Health Organization defines health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.<sup>98</sup> At this time, the coronavirus disease has presented unprecedented health challenges across the globe. The COVID experience has caused us to reflect on quality of life, health and well-being, and even end-of-life. The effects of COVID-19 have affected people’s routines, livelihoods, mental health and well-being. As a provider of spiritual care in the church, the effects of the pandemic are part of our current climate and must be addressed. Healthcare workers are risking their lives every day to save lives and are promoting compassionate care while doing so. We must work together.

As a caring congregation, we have faced the challenges of limitations on the activities for helping our members, such as visitation in the hospital. One of the mission activities our children participated in was to create cards for the sick and the dying. The

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<sup>97</sup> O’Rourke, 19.

<sup>98</sup> “What is the WHO definition of health?,” World Health Organization, accessed November 24, 2020, <https://www.who.int/about/who-we-are/frequently-asked-questions>.

cards were delivered to the patients even though visitors were not allowed. Reaching out to the hospital chaplains requesting a visit to loved ones in the hospital allowed us to form relationships between clergy and chaplains. While restrictions have affected the facilitation of spiritual care in clinical settings as well, healthcare professionals have been very sensitive to the spiritual and emotional needs of their patients. While many healthcare professionals may not be equipped or comfortable to deal with this aspect, once again collaborative efforts have allowed people to provide care for patients and families. My experience as a hospital chaplain has provided the background and understanding for facilitating the need for spiritual care with our members who are sick and dying, though challenging in these circumstances.

A nother important aspect of caring during the pandemic has been support for the families of loved ones who are sick. In addition, one of the most challenging times requiring family support is during a chronic illness, when one is critically ill and at end-of-life. For example, one of our church members was on life support, with non-local family members and hospital policy prevented visitation (due to the pandemic). The phone calls became very important in keeping family members updated and comforted as the patient's status declined. The social worker at the hospital facilitated phone calls from loved ones so they could say good-bye. Deacons sent cards to the family after the patient died. Members from the church even cleaned out the deceased member's house because travel was limited by the pandemic. I wonder if these extra measures would have happened prior to the pandemic.

## Theological Perspectives on Pastoral Care in the Midst of a Pandemic

In the midst of a global pandemic, circumstances change quickly. There are a lot of questions with corresponding “I don’t know” answers. Therefore, we must be clear about our basic values and principles. First Presbyterian’s mission statement is as follows:

First Pres is called by God to SHARE the Good news,  
to be an INSPIRING Christ-centered presence in Fort Lauderdale  
by TRANSFORMING our local community and beyond.

By caring for our congregation and community, we are putting these words in action by being the hands and feet of Christ in a broken and hurting world. In the midst of a worldwide pandemic and in spite of disease, division, violence, poverty and all the things we worry about, God is in control and we are invited to sing a new song!

At the time of this writing, it’s not even Thanksgiving but people are decorating for Christmas, earlier than ever before. People are looking for hope and exclaiming that we are Easter people. The familiar Christmas carol Joy to the World makes reference to Psalm 96 and serves as a wonderful reminder to sing a new song: “Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice.”<sup>99</sup> Psalm 96 provides a model for how to praise and to sing a new song: we are to glorify the Lord, we are to confess who God is and what God has done, and to witness to the good news of God.

In his book, *Secrets in the Dark*, Frederick Buechner relates the story of a little girl at a Christmas pageant. The manger was in front of an Episcopal church somewhere, with Mary and Joseph present. The wise men and handful of shepherds were also present, and of course the baby was lying in the straw. The nativity story was read aloud with

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<sup>99</sup>Psalm 96:11

carols sung throughout, and everything was going fine until the angels arrived. The children in white were scattered throughout the congregation:

At the right moment they were supposed to come forward and gather around the manger saying, “ Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will among men,” and that is just what they did except there were so many of them that there was a fair amount of crowding and jockeying for position, with the result that one particular angel, a girl about nine years old who was smaller than most of them, ended up so far out on the fringes of things that even by craning her neck and standing on tiptoe could she see what was going on. “ Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will among men,” they all sang on cue, and then in the momentary pause that followed, the small girl electrified the entire church by crying out in a voice shrill with irritation and frustration and enormous sadness at having her view blocked, “ Let Jesus show!” <sup>100</sup>

As we care for one another in the church and beyond, we are invited to sing a new song! This vignette reminds us to let Jesus show in the world, as together we care for one another. As the participants so poignantly answered the question, with positivity and excitement: “How is First Pres caring for people in the midst of a pandemic?”, I listened for common threads from the members of a congregation that have invested deeply in sharing the good news in and around Fort Lauderdale, to be an inspiring presence of God, by transforming our local community and beyond. We have many miles to go, and the many caring acts witnessed within our congregation and in the community inspire us to keep going. As Robert Frost wrote in his poem Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But I have promises to keep.  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup>Frederick Buechner, *Secrets of the Dark* (New York, NY: Abingdon Pres, 1973), 268.

<sup>101</sup>Robert Frost, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”, Poetry Foundation, accessed November 25, 2020, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42891/stopping-by-woods-on-a-snowy-evening>.

This last stanza of Frost's poem is used in many walks of life and is appropriate in the church as well. The meaning of "miles to go before I sleep" refers to a long journey ahead, fulfilling many responsibilities before dying, perhaps.<sup>102</sup> Congregational care at First Presbyterian is not new, though defining care and developing a plan is necessary in order to meet the unique needs of today. Along the way, we may want to notice the landscape.

Towards that end, a model for theological reflection from professor of pastoral theology, Pamela Cooper-White, encourages the researcher to identify what theological or spiritual theme(s) come to mind in light of this research.<sup>103</sup> In times of crisis, we are easily tempted to turn to human solutions. Yet Job's story points to something bigger, calling us to be humble about our own abilities to control outcomes. It took a lot to get Job's attention, and I wonder if the global pandemic is finally awakening more people to realities of the fragility of life and how interconnected we are as human beings. While we ask, "Where is God?", this is an age-old question and one that Job famously complained, "I cry to you for help and you do not answer me..."<sup>104</sup>

Cooper-White's model then invites us to think critically about an image that fits the context we've been studying.<sup>105</sup> Job's complaint is the complaint of many in 2020, and that image does seem particularly fitting, though another letter in the Bible also helps to illuminate my understanding of the people and their experience of God. This letter suggests a deeper and more empathic way of engaging in pastoral ministry in particular trying times. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses and the saints of then and

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<sup>102</sup>Ibid.

<sup>103</sup>Moschella, 210.

<sup>104</sup>Job 30:20

<sup>105</sup>Moschella, 210.

now have paved the way for ministry today. The letter I'm referring to is Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, specifically "Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>106</sup> They wrote a letter to a church in Thessalonica that was experiencing tough times, in particular persecution. They were dealing with tough times and suffering, but at the beginning of the letter, they express gratitude to God for their brothers and sisters. They have a lot to complain about, but they begin with words of thanksgiving. Clearly, gratitude is a priority and value for them.

This is so much more than saying thank you on Thanksgiving Day; rather it's a way of being present in life with all of its trials and tribulations and sharing the love of God with others. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy place gratitude in the context of faith in their second letter to the Thessalonians: "We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore, we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring."<sup>107</sup>

Gratitude can help us all to become more of ourselves, created in the image of God. The challenge is to live our lives with thanksgiving even when life is hard. Thank you. These two words: thank you. Meister Johann Eckhart, a medieval mystic, sums it up well: "If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, that will be enough."<sup>108</sup> As I finished up interviewing the participants from our congregation, I was

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<sup>106</sup>1 & 2 Thes. 1:1

<sup>107</sup>2 Thes. 1:3-4

<sup>108</sup>Meister Eckhart quotes, BrainyQuote, accessed November 25, 2020, <https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/meister-eckhart-quotes>.

filled with an enormous sense of gratitude for the willingness of people to take a risk and to grow for the sake of others, and for the deep and abiding love for our church and God. Writing a note to thank someone for encouraging my work through the research study is an act of caring for one another, all the while giving thanks to God for all the very many blessings I've received. This value of gratitude and thanksgiving opens up our hearts towards the hearts of others. It's a way of being in the world.

As a congregational care plan is further developed and implemented, gratitude will be an important theme informing the care for the people for such a time as this. Lament is appropriate (as I explained earlier), but lament and gratitude must both be navigated simultaneously. While it may be tempting to suppress one in favor of the other, both sorrow and joy are complex emotions and are woven throughout the Scriptures. Job understood this complexity and asked, "Should we accept only the good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?"<sup>109</sup>

We now return to the waiting room with hope in God. One participant asked: "Do we care enough?" We have been showing up in new and creative ways and the challenge is to intentionally connect people with one another within the congregation and in the community. As Richard Rohr said, "All transformation takes place here. We have to allow ourselves to be drawn out of business as usual and remain patiently on the threshold (limen, in Latin) where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown. There alone our old world is left behind, while we are not yet sure of the new existence."<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup>Job 2:11

<sup>110</sup>Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 155-56.



## SUMMARY OF DEFINING AND DEVELOPING A CONGREGATIONAL CARE PLAN

With the focus on the healing of the body, mind and spirit whether physically or emotionally, care means to be present with the other, to grieve, to experience sorrow, to cry out with, and even to celebrate life. A congregational care plan with committed leaders and implemented for the purpose of caring for one another will “let Jesus show” in the world. With the foundation in place from our previous leaders in the church, being present to others in the midst of a pandemic has provided a new level of trust because we have adapted and embraced ministry in new and creative ways.

The strong deacon ministry at First Presbyterian Church in place now serves as a building block for a more comprehensive congregational care plan, beginning with the establishment of a Congregational Care elder on the session of the church. The elder will work closely with the Associate Pastor for Congregational Care and will implement a small group model which will include identifying leaders for small groups, training, and ongoing workshops on topics of interest, such as hospital visitation, crisis intervention, listening skills, and end-of-life care. Small groups of members may be built upon the lists of congregational care phone calls made throughout the pandemic, with several groups already in place such as our women’s and men’s Bible study classes, the prayer team, and youth and college ministry teams. Leaders of small groups will meet regularly and will chart interactions in our membership data base. Training sessions will help lay persons to gain the skills and confidence to provide the care to others. The training will include opportunities to discuss areas of concerns and learn more about caring relationships, such as how to respond to care needs and referrals. In order to prevent burnout, monthly meetings of the leaders and caregivers will provide support and space to check in with

each other. For those interested in advanced training, the pastors will offer additional resources such as Stephen Ministry and courses for lay members who want to learn more about pastoral ministry.

As we continue to listen and learn, the leadership may want to further revise the approaches we have taken to care for our congregation, through worship, educational opportunities, and mission work, as we continue to assess the needs within the congregation. Together we will discern how we might support the voices who are marginalized in our church and in our community's life together.

Over the years I have heard many, many hymns and arrangements of sacred music, as my grandmother was a pastor in the Methodist church and a musician, and my mother has been an organist and choir director for over 60 years. At my own ordination service, I was shocked to hear a choir's rendition of a hymn I had heard hundreds of times. In the PC(USA), the Book of Order (W-4.0402) describes the setting for the service, with the focus upon Christ and the job and responsibility of the mission and ministry of the church.<sup>111</sup> At my Service of Ordination of a Minister of Word and Sacrament, the choir sang an arrangement of To God be the Glory! In my photo album of the service, the picture of the choir singing shows the many faces of wonder and joy. It is a glorious hymn to be sung joyfully in the spirit of gratitude! I close with these words:

To God be the glory, great things he has done!  
So, loved he the world that he gave us his Son,  
who yielded his life an atonement for sin,  
and opened the life gate that all may go in.

Refrain

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<sup>111</sup> Presbyterian Church USA. Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, Part II: Book of Order 2019-2023 (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2019), W-4.0402 [p. 103], [https://www.pcusa.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/2019-23-boo-elec\\_010621.pdf](https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/2019-23-boo-elec_010621.pdf).

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, let the earth hear his voice!  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord; let the people rejoice!  
O come to the Father through Jesus the Son,  
and give him the glory; great things he has done!<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup>Fanny Jane Crosby, "To God Be the Glory" (No. 485) in the Presbyterian Hymnal (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990).

## A c k n o w l e d g e m e n t s

This project would not have been possible without the support and wisdom of my academic advisor, Rev. Tanya Linn Bennett, Ph.D., and the Director of Doctoral Studies, Rev. Meredith E. Hoxie Schol, PhD at Drew University.

I am grateful for the encouragement of the congregation and session at First Presbyterian Church of Fort Lauderdale, and my mentor and professional advisor, Rev. Dr. Patrick Wrisley.

The members of the contextual committee at First Presbyterian Church have been companions on this journey, as have the participants from the congregation in the study. All have provided a wealth of information, encouragement and grace.

Jennifer Janssen, Jesse Mann, Elizabeth Siegelman, and Kelsey Wallace provided invaluable support in the areas of research, writing, and formatting.

I would like to thank my colleagues in the Doctor of Ministry program at Drew University for their friendship and presence, especially throughout the challenges of a worldwide pandemic. I could not have completed this project without the understanding and support from my family. My deepest appreciation is extended to each and everyone who have made this possible.

To God be the glory forever and ever.

Amen.

From Galatians 1:5

## APPENDIX

### Defining and Developing a Congregational Care Plan for a Large Urban Church

#### INFORMED CONSENT

Introduction: My name is Pam Masten and I am a student at Drew University conducting an ethnographic study for my DM in project. My telephone number is (407)701-8612 and email as follows: [pmasten@drew.edu](mailto:pmasten@drew.edu). My professional advisor is the Rev. Dr. Patrick Wrisley is (407)276-2678. You may contact either of us at any time if you have questions about this study.

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to study the practice of congregational care at First Presbyterian Church of Fort Lauderdale. I am trying to understand what the members of First Presbyterian need and hope for with regard to a congregational care plan.

Procedure: If you consent, you will be asked several questions in an oral interview that will take place via zoom, as we are in a worldwide pandemic. If you agree, zoom has the capability to record the interview.

#### Survey questions

- 1) Is First Pres a caring church? Why or why not?<sup>113</sup>
- 2) In what ways are First Pres serving the care needs of this congregation in the midst of a pandemic?
- 3) Where are the gaps in congregational care?
- 4) What are you hoping for as a church with respect to caring for the congregation and community, and what does a caring church look like?<sup>114</sup>
- 5) How do you perceive pastors and care, with respect to our church's understanding?
- 6) What does the ideal care plan look like for First Presbyterian?

Time required: The interview will take approximately one hour of your time.

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<sup>113</sup>The question is important in order to understand and define what 'care' means in the church and for First Pres.

<sup>114</sup>Again, this question will help to clarify what 'caring' means in the church and at First Pres.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may still refuse to answer any question that you do not wish to answer. You may also withdraw from the study at any time.

Risks: There are minimal risks associated with this research. All efforts will be taken to make your responses to the questions anonymous. However, if any questions cause you any concern, you can decide not to respond to that question.

Benefits: Taking part in this research may provide you with an opportunity to individually reflect on the nature of congregational care and to contribute to an important time in the life of our congregation. There is no payment or other inducement provided for your participation.

Confidentiality: Your name will be kept confidential in all of the reporting and/or writing related to this study. I will be the only person present for the interview and the only person who listens to the recording. When I write up the narrative, I will use pseudonyms for all participants.

Sharing the results: I plan to construct a written narrative of what I learn based on these interviews, together with my research. This study will be submitted to my professor and academic advisor, along with my professional advisor, when completed. The results of the study will be available to you and portions of the narrative may be available to First Presbyterian Church.

Before you sign: By signing below, you are agreeing to a recorded interview for this research study. The procedures of this study have been explained to me and my questions have been addressed. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without penalty.

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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