

Alex:

Well, hello, I'm Alex Joyner. I'm the District Superintendent of the Eastern Shore District in the Virginia Conference. And I'm also the facilitator for the work group on back to in-person worship, appointed by Bishop Sharma Lewis. And this is one of a periodic series of videos that we're doing to talk about the process of going back to in-person worship and to try to answer some of those questions. And today I'm here with Mr. Steve Brown, who is the Chancellor of the conference, and one of the key members of the committee. And Steve, I don't know if there are any other introductions you want to do.

Steven:

No, just been a lawyer for 30 years. I've been working with the conference now for eight, going into my ninth year, before that was general counsel for a local church here in Richmond at Trinity United Methodist.

Alex:

Right.

Steven:

So happy to be here and thank you for all your leadership with the back to in-person worship group.

Alex:

Well, we are talking today right after a new announcement from the Governor related to gatherings in the Commonwealth of Virginia, we are still in the midst of the pandemic that got us together in the first place. And we are continuing to live with the technical assistance manual that our work group has put together. And some of the questions that we get are related to why so many restrictions, what is it about this pandemic that causes us to do this? We see churches down the street from different denominations who have much different approaches, why this approach?

Steven:

Well, I think the answer to your question is pretty clear from even Friday with the Governor coming out with some modified restrictions, it was helpful I think for us to take a step back and I think for the Commonwealth to take a step back and although those restrictions don't prevent people from going to work or going to school, it doesn't impact churches in terms of worship services, it will have an impact on other things that churches do. And the reason that we need those restrictions is honestly, health and safety. Has nothing to do with legal liability. I'm not concerned at all about a church being sued. If somebody gets sick, that's not our issue. Our issue frankly, is our membership base. And we have quite a few folks over the age of 65 in our membership ranks. We would do it if we didn't have people over the age of 65, but we're really trying to keep people healthy and safe.

Steven:

And that's why we're requiring people to wear the face covering in the service. We're not allowing singing inside and we're doing the social distancing. So the reason we're doing it is for our members, the reason other denominations may not, I don't know. You know, but there's a number of folks I hear that are very happy that we're doing what we're doing. A number of denominations are using our material. I've heard from countless fellow chancellors, they all call themselves chancellors, but they're lawyers for the other denominations, thanking us for writing what we're writing. They're taking it off our website,

slapping their material on, which is perfect. And we have said, "Perfect, use whatever you want. We don't mind it's out there for public use." And have heard really about 90%, very positive, 10% of folks saying, "Gee, I wish we didn't have to do this." But most people are very appreciative that we're going through the safety and the health issues that we're going through.

Alex:

Right. Well, I know as legal counsel for the annual conference that we call on you for a number of things, one of the things that's in the technical assistance manual, the TAM, as we're used to calling it now, is the healthy church team construction. And one of the things that's in there is the strong suggestion that a lawyer or attorney be a part of that team, at least on a consulting basis. Why is that in there?

Steven:

Well, we put that in the original handbook that we had written, and then now in the technical assistance manual, to help the local church, if they've got a lawyer on staff and we also put, if you have a doctor or a nurse, the reason we wanted those folks to be on the healthy church team for the local church is twofold. One, the health folks can help you obviously with health related issues, the nurse or the doctor, the lawyer can help you with some legal issues and likely do that for you for free. And most lawyers will know a number of the issues that you may have as a healthy church team that are foreign to you, but aren't necessarily foreign to a lawyer. For example, somebody in a healthy church team may say, "Why don't we have people sign COVID waivers, let's get them to sign a waiver that they're not going to sue us as a church."

Steven:

The lawyer will likely say, which is what I've found, that's not a good idea for several reasons. One is from just a moral standpoint we shouldn't have people sign waivers to come to church, but they're not enforceable in Virginia. Now they're enforceable in other states, but they're not here. And a lawyer on your local HCT would be able to tell you that without you having to expend the funds to find that out, or have to guess on your own. So lawyers can be, although we're the butt of a many joke, when you need us people are usually out there asking, and they can answer a ton of questions that the healthy church team could use them for and take advantage of.

Alex:

Absolutely. One of the other things that we hear is just in response to the discomfort of all these restrictions, folks are longing for the way that we used to worship. And we often hear, "I'm tired of these, all these restrictions." And we're doing it for such a small percentage of the population. So why do we have this level when the danger seems to be small for a large number of folks?

Steven:

And when you look at it like that, I could understand that. The problem is that the danger's deadly and can be deadly to a number of folks. No, not everybody I've known. You know, my niece got COVID working down in South Carolina, wasn't wearing a face covering, worked at a bar and unbelievably all of the staff got COVID. And she was down for two weeks, not in the hospital, but she's 29 years old. It's much easier when you're dealing with it at a younger basis and you don't have an underlying health condition. There's a number of folks in our denomination that can handle COVID with no problem. And it probably would be like the flu, but there are a number of folks in our denomination, both young and old,

that if they contracted this virus, it could be deadly to them or at least have extreme damaging effects for them going forward.

Steven:

And so the reason we're doing it for our brothers and sisters that are the most vulnerable, is because it's the right thing to do. And yes, I'm tired of wearing a face covering. You and I are tired of doing it here right now. I would love to sing every Sunday inside, but it's not possible now. And if you told me in March, we could save 235,000 people's lives by doing X, Y, and Z, and I'm not sure we could have saved that many, I think it's incumbent upon us to save one life if we can. And if that means having the discomfort of wearing a face covering, having to be socially distant from folks that I'm usually hugging, or shaking hands with on a regular basis, I'm willing to do that, to save that brother or sister. So that's honestly why we're doing it as a conference.

Alex:

Right. And again, we're talking at a period when the numbers are rising, case numbers are rising and the seriousness is still there. Still awaiting a vaccine. And even though we didn't expect to be still working together in this work group this long, or hoped that we wouldn't, we still are. And so I appreciate all of what you bring to the team, the gifts and the insights. And we are a learning community still. And we have learned a lot over these last six months, and we've seen churches be very creative as they go back to in-person worship. And we've been able to make some changes that hopefully have been well received in a lot of churches. And we'll continue to do that. And we look forward to being able to share that learning with annual conferences as we go ahead. Thank you Steve for this time. And thank you for all the work that you do.

Steven:

Thank you, Alex. And thanks for all the work you're doing as well. And thank you to the Bishop and to the other DSs for all the hard work and the local clergy, the laity, everybody is pulling an extra oar that everybody's tired of doing. We're in month seven of this, and I'm sure everybody wishes it could go back to normal. Let's hope after next year, when we're all vaccinated or that everything will be back close to where it will be normal. And so I really appreciate all the work that you all are doing. You guys are in the trenches. You know, I'm not in the trenches as much as you all are because you deal with it on a regular basis, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. So I really appreciate it.

Alex:

And all God's people said, "Amen."

Steven:

Amen.