Fellowship of Local Pastors and Associate Members

Rev. Warren Schoming, chair

I’ve been asked to share for a few moments what the clergy covenant means and how is it both important and sometimes hard. I especially hope that my sharing will be particularly encouraging for the fellowship of local pastors and associate members. Our relationship within the whole covenant community of clergy is vitally important and needed. There should be no doubt that our fellowship is needed and valued by our sisters and brothers in the orders as we work together for the making of disciples to transform the world. It should be understood that our covenant as a Fellowship of Local Pastors and Associate Members is to develop a bond of unity and common commitment to the mission and ministry of The United Methodist Church and the annual conference; and enable the creation of relationships that allow mutual support and trust.

So what exactly does clergy covenant mean? Especially when we are separated as Orders and Fellowship? Especially when Local Pastors and Associate Members may have some differences in our own fellowship? Especially when the whole of us – Orders and Fellowship may share some theological differences – maybe we are not all extremely centered. What does it mean when each and every one of us has experienced a call to be in ministry but perhaps we have discovered our call living in tension within the church and the polity that insures pastoral discipline and leadership not to our understanding of the grace of God, Christ and Holy Spirit?

So what exactly does clergy covenant mean when some of four connectional churches do not really understand what it means to be in connection? Or when the appointive process doesn’t always get it right and makes for an unhealthy appointment-match? Or we fill so isolated or find ourselves in culture shock?

I would like to see our Great Plains Conference fashion and form a Clergy Covenant that would embrace diversity, welcome the stranger, and be inclusive to all people and clergy.

I believe our clergy covenant should equip us to continue spiritual formation in Christ for excellence in ministry, affirming that excellence in ministry is reflected in the character of the clergyperson and competency in ministerial performance.

Yet when will we risk being in covenant to hold our laity accountable for the decline of our churches?

But, I believe our clergy covenant should always be about modeling the compassion and graciousness of Christ in our mission and ministry to the local church and beyond.

I hope our Clergy Covenant can become a means for us to be kind and gentle souls who will always seek to see past our divisions and tensions to our common ground in Jesus Christ. I pray for this Great Plains Conference clergy that we will always reflect decency, respect, tolerance and trust for one another as we tend to each other’s soul in God’s love.
So what does the clergy covenant really bring about? What does it really ensure? Webster’s dictionary defines “covenant” as a “binding or solemn agreement made by two or more individuals to do or keep from doing a specified thing; a promise.” I guess that can mean – “let’s get close” or “stay out of my space.” But maybe, just maybe, it means, in part anyway initiating and receiving hospitality among and beyond our orders and fellowship. I also believe that our clergy covenant has to do with making the first move – about taking the risk to form covenant groups or join a group.

So, let’s take that risk in faith, hope, and love. John Wesley may have said it best by saying: “If your heart is with my heart, then give me your hand.” No doubt about it, the value of the Clergy Covenant should be about listening and building relationships based on the love of Christ to create great churches, leaders, disciples and a transformed world.

Tennessee Williams wrote a poem entitled, Covenant, and it reads like this:

If you are happy, I will give you an apple.
If you are anxious, I will twist your arm,
and if you permit me, I will be glad to hold you
close to my heart forever and do you no harm.

If I am happy, will you give me an apple?
If I am anxious, you may twist my arm.
And if you would like to, I would like you to hold me
close to your heart forever and do me no harm.

This is a bargain, only two can make it.
This is a covenant offered with desperate calm,
it being uncertain that lovers can drive out demons
with the gift of an apple or the twist of an arm.

The Clergy Covenant ought to be the way for us to move more deeply into relationship with one another. So as we begin to hear our birthing cry as the clergy of the Great Plains Annual Conference, may we move more deeply into clergy covenant as we take the risk to hold one another close to our hearts forever and do no harm.

Thank you