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Field Notes: A Ministerial Community of Care Responds to a Pandemic

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Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Field Notes:

A Ministerial Community of Care Responds to a Pandemic

Ron Bruner

Abstract: These notes report the interaction of the ministerial team at Westview Boys' Home with its theology and context during the COVID-19 crisis. This community developed specific practices to protect its staff and residents while continuing to move forward with its mission to care for youth from hard places.

Context

Westview Boys' Home, a family-style childcare facility affiliated with Churches of Christ, serves male adolescents having experienced at-risk situations. Twenty young men reside with highly trained caregivers in large homes on Westview's 1,500-acre ranch in rural southwestern Oklahoma. Residents attend Hollis Public Schools and worship with the Childress Church of Christ.

Community

A regional board of directors governs Westview through the executive director, Ron Bruner. In turn, the executive director organizes the ministry community into functional teams. To engage larger issues, the community prefers a communal discernment process, which prayerfully interprets situations, identifies problems, imagines responses, selects actions, enacts solutions, and then evaluates outcomes.¹ Covenanted hospitality shapes communal character.²

¹ Ron Bruner, "Communally Discerning a Covenant of Hospitality for the Care of Children at Westview Boys' Home," (DMin thesis, Abilene Christian University, 2010), 90-103.

² Ron Bruner, "Toward Just Hospitality," *Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry* 3 1 (2017): 39-58. <http://digitalcommons.acu.edu/discernment/vol3/iss1/3>.

Situation

In March of 2020, several Westview staff and residents attended the Oklahoma Youth Expo (OYE) in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma with livestock projects. On March 15th, Oklahoma City mayor David Holt declared a state of emergency mandating the closure of large venues because of COVID-19.³ OYE officials disputed the proclamation's relevance to their venue and hesitated to comply. After consulting with an expert in immunopathology, Westview's administrative team called staff and residents back to the campus. Hollis Public Schools closed the next week. As a respiratory disease, COVID-19 posed a safety threat to staff and residents. Four team members were over 65 years old, and three others were vulnerable because of respiratory issues. Asthma affected two residents.

Complex political and social interactions brought a chaotic and ineffective response nationally. At the state level, Oklahoma's governor, Kevin Stitt, chose not to gauge the effectiveness of state response by the number of new cases but on the available capacity of hospitals to care for COVID-19 patients. Because of the lag between symptom onset and hospitalization, state response was largely ineffective. The propensity of Oklahomans to believe COVID-19 misinformation compounded leadership issues. Consequently, Oklahoma experienced one of the highest per capita mortality rates in the United States.⁴

Interpretation and theological connections

After prayerful discernment, the Westview administrative team discarded hospital capacity as an effective or ethical metric for response.⁵ Because government leaders appeared to be more concerned about economic viability than human health, the team had to acknowledge that Westview's responsibilities were more focused than theirs. The team felt responsible to keep the Westview community safe. Considering the close-knit nature of this ministry, a single COVID-19 case represented a threat to the entire community, requiring robust practical responses to limit COVID-19.

³ Oklahoma City, "Revised Proclamation of State of Emergency," March 15, 2020. <https://www.okc.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/18946/637304125300170000>.

⁴ The toll: 388,755/100,000 as of March 30, 2022; *U.S. News and World Report*, "COVID-19 Deaths per 100K," [https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/coronavirus-data/covid-death-rate?active\[\]=40&chart_type=map](https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/coronavirus-data/covid-death-rate?active[]=40&chart_type=map).

⁵ This article is one of several works on ministry responses to COVID-19. See, for example, six articles in volume 18, issue 3 of the *Christian Education Journal* and Sarah E. Holmes, "The Changing Nature of Ministry amongst Children and Families in the UK during the Covid-19 Pandemic," *Christian Education Journal* 19 1 (2022): 134-151.

Theologically, hospitality at Westview requires balancing safety and vulnerability.⁶ No ministry is possible unless humans make themselves vulnerable, “to hear, see, receive, sympathize, and possibly even suffer with or for the other.” Safety, though, “is more than avoiding pain resulting from the abuse of power; it is security against injury from natural or human dangers, and providence for resources and relationships that are life-giving.”⁷ This balance shifts with circumstances and works—in the interests of divine justice—to leverage power to the advantage of Westview’s at-risk youth. Amidst COVID-19, Westview leadership discerned the necessity of retaining multi-dimensional vulnerability to youth in care while severely limiting the community’s vulnerability to outsiders to keep residents and staff safe from “natural dangers.” This protective caution also shielded the vulnerable in communities around the Westview community because it prevented potential infection of others by individuals from Westview.

Response

Beginning March 16, 2020, Westview closed its campus to visitors. Hollis schools closed after spring break, as did all Oklahoma Schools. The administration restricted travel for everyone on campus. Westview instituted rigorous cleaning and preventative practices (masking and distancing) throughout all facilities. Staff either worked at home or in offsetting shifts in private office spaces. Board and staff conducted meetings outdoors or via Zoom. Simultaneously, each residence began to operate independently to keep gatherings of caregivers and residents beneath the limit of ten given in CDC guidelines. The administrative team hoped to keep everyone healthy until vaccines were available, or herd immunity was achieved. Herd immunity turned out to be a phantom.

In May 2020, several young men finished their program and successfully returned to their families. Rather than immediately admitting new residents, Westview administrators placed a moratorium on intakes until COVID-19 testing was reliable and available (October 2020). At that point, Westview added young men when they passed the regular intake criteria and a COVID-19 test.

A new normal on campus

Essentially, Westview weathered the COVID-19 crisis "at home." Members of the Westview community maintained the ranch, worked on residences,

⁶ Bruner, “Toward Just Hospitality,” 45-48.

⁷ Bruner, “Toward Just Hospitality,” 46-47.

and enjoyed recreation. Morale remained high. Westview joined with the Childress Church of Christ for online worship and classes; the church worked diligently to keep opportunities available. No church camp—an important component of the summer program—was possible until 2022.

At the July 2020 board meeting (all board meetings were now online), the administrative team expressed concerns about a return to face-to-face classes in the fall because of the weak COVID response plan at Hollis schools. Westview's board was concerned that moving youth to an online alternative (K12 Online) would create enduring political issues and instead, empowered the executive director to negotiate with the school. Days before classes began, the Hollis school board ordered faculty to provide online alternatives to face-to-face classes for all Hollis students. Westview opted for online, converted a meeting room to a classroom, purchased computers, installed fiber-optic Internet, and allocated personnel to assist Westview residents. Participation in school athletics was suspended. The online option remained available for the 2020-2021 school year.

Even though the Westview team kept residents busy in school, they also made time for livestock programs, camping, fishing, hiking, and games. Unfortunately, allowing families to visit residents was problematic because of exposure risks. Instead, Westview increased visits by phone and online platforms. As Christmas 2020 approached, though, the Westview team felt compelled to give residents time with their families for their mental health. Westview leadership insisted that families took their sons home for one week. Although some parents had to be persuaded, all the residents had family time to benefit their psychological health. Team members instructed families on how to keep their young men safe over the holidays and informed them Westview would be testing their youth for COVID after their return. Five days after the young men came back, everyone received COVID tests and the results were negative.

Westview residents and team members were inoculated by February 2021. Residents returned to face-to-face classes in August of 2021.

Metrics and results

Because Westview's youth emerge from at-risk circumstances, it was common for the school to expel three to six students a year. For the first time in decades, Hollis schools neither suspended nor expelled a Westview resident in the 2020-2021 school year. This was an unforeseen outcome. All Westview residents were promoted. The same sequestration that empowered a trauma-informed environment preventing expulsion had the side effect, though, of reducing social and relationship opportunities.

Unfortunately, the isolation greatly reduced the interactions of residents with the church youth group, limiting spiritually formative relationships for a time.

Importantly, by the grace of God the entire Westview campus made it to COVID-19 inoculations and boosters by February 2021 without a single case of COVID-19. There were also fewer cases of flu. In the year since, a few staff members and one resident, all inoculated, experienced mild cases of COVID-19. Other residential care facilities in Oklahoma experienced a much more difficult time.

Adaptation and learning

The Westview team would prefer not to experience another pandemic, but the very nature of the global economy makes that improbable. If a similar scenario arises, the team now has a template they can modify to meet emerging realities.

Whatever the crisis, several elements seem essential for survival. To maintain the trust of team members and clients, leaders must listen well to individual concerns, prayerfully discern the course that appears to follow the ongoing work of God, and communicate clearly and often as the community flexes to meet each new day. In those interactions, both board and administration must enact a non-anxious leadership. Such calm is ultimately rooted in God's presence, providence, and protection.

Ron Bruner (DMin, Abilene Christian) has been the executive director of Westview Boys' Home in Hollis, Oklahoma since 1999. His research interests include the spiritual formation of children and adolescents. He also serves as the editor of Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry.