

Episcopalians in public office face tough calls in the Covid era

By Melodie Woerman

LOCAL OFFICIALS across the state of Kansas have faced difficult decisions this year, from health concerns caused by the coronavirus pandemic to economic downturns that resulted in job losses. And when those officials also are members of churches of the diocese, they say their faith helps them through tough times.

Brandon Whipple is the mayor of Wichita, the state's largest city, who took office on Jan. 20 after serving four terms in the Kansas House of Representatives. And just as the word "coronavirus" was making its way into America's vocabulary, Wichita was facing a crisis of a different kind — the loss of jobs in the aviation industry, the city's largest employment sector.



Mayor Brandon Whipple

With Boeing 737 Max planes grounded by safety concerns, employers that provided parts for those planes shut down, too, including Spirit AeroSystems (which produced 70 percent of the 737 Max planes) and about 500 local small business.

Thousands of people were laid off.

"When I came into office I was told that Wichita was one of the most recession-proof cities," Whipple said. "That's true, unless your largest employer is grounded."

Within weeks of that blow, Whipple and other city officials also had to confront what the effects of Covid-19 might mean. "Early on we didn't know what to expect," he said. "Can we set up extra hospital beds at the university? Can we ask for help from the National Guard?"

As in other places across the country, Black residents were hit hard by the virus, so Whipple worked with leaders of that community to get a mobile test site set up and 5,000 masks distributed. "My focus now is the health and well-being of our citizens," he said.



PHOTO VIA FACEBOOK

Wichita Mayor Brandon Whipple (left) helps volunteers hand out donated masks in late May.

Whipple said the most challenging thing so far was his desire to get a citywide mask ordinance in place before the July 4 weekend, after political differences meant the governor's ability to mandate mask usage statewide had expired. Having seen the correlation between gatherings and spikes in case numbers, he knew this was an important step.

The mayor said he risked the ire of City Council members by calling them to an emergency meeting on July 3. "People had to cancel vacations to be there," he said. After hearing from more than a dozen medical professionals, the council voted 5-to-4 to mandate mask usage. "This was the biggest risk I'd taken as mayor," he said. "But I knew if it happened, this could be my biggest success."

Err on the side of love

Whipple, who is a member of St. James', Wichita, and serves on its Vestry, said his faith helps him when making tough calls. "Episcopalians err on the side of love in almost everything," he said. "Land on the side of what is right and just, and you probably will make better decisions."

That was tested on July 4, when people opposed to the mask mandate he had championed picketed his house, some openly carrying weapons, while his three young boys were inside. He went to the store and bought cases of soft drinks and water, and his wife Chelsea, who is director of programs for St. James', put them in a cooler on the lawn, with a sign inviting picketers to enjoy a cold beverage, along with a wish for a Happy 4th.

“The protest was small and we were able to keep the kids away from that,” he said. “But we tried to set the tone — err on the side of love.”

Decisions about school openings

Those entrusted with decisions about school openings this fall face some of the hardest challenges. Two of them are active members of the diocese.

Jacquie Lightcap is a member of the school board for the Auburn-Washburn district, with about 6,300 students in suburban Topeka. She is an active member of Grace Cathedral, Topeka, where her husband, Torey, is the dean.



Jacquie Lightcap

She said the questions around students returning to school this fall were “the biggest decisions I’ve had to make as a school board member.” The board decided to delay the start of school by two weeks, with students in a hybrid model — one-half of each class attending school in person each week and other days online, with the other half of the class flipping days.

She received many emails from parents and teachers with ideas about classes this fall, but they were only one thing she had to consider. “Wading through all the facts provided by health officials in our community, listening to the concerns and opinions of our staff and families, learning about all the layers of work our teachers and administrators have put into making this successful for all our students — all these factors go into these decisions.”

Lightcap said her faith is “absolutely critical” to who she is and how she approaches everything in her life, including school board matters. “Tending to my neighbor, seeking Christ in those I meet, taking care of those in need, honoring everyone with dignity and respect — that’s all based on my faith and is built up by my Grace Cathedral community,” she said.

Brian Geary, a member of St. Thomas, Overland Park, and the treasurer of the Diocese of Kansas, is vice president of the school board for Olathe Public Schools, the state’s second-largest district with more than 30,000 students. That district is providing parents with the option on in-classroom learning or online learning for their students, with the chance to change options after the first semester. The district has



Brian Geary

delayed the start of school until Sept. 8 to allow more time to prepare. Geary said the board has “relied almost completely on the Johnson County Health Department for all guidance related to our students’ participation in both academic and extracurricular activities,” along with recommendations from the State Board of Education and the Kansas State High School Activities Association, and input from parents and teachers. “We try to blend it into the best for all,” he said.

He said his faith has helped him to better see the needs of others. “I think the biggest thing my faith has helped me with in this decision-making process is to respect each other’s points of view and have empathy for others.”

He also encouraged fellow Episcopalians to turn to prayer to help their schools. “I ask that all of those in the Diocese of Kansas pray for all of the members of their school communities in these unprecedented times, and that you offer grace and hope to each other.”

Health of the largest county

Janeé Hanzlick, a member of St. Michael and All Angels, Mission, has been a Commissioner of Johnson County, the state’s largest with more than 600,000 residents since 2019. She said that during the pandemic, “county commissioners across Kansas were put in the challenging position of deciding when and how to reopen businesses and services,” and she received hundreds of emails and calls.



Janeé Hanzlick

She said constituents wanted everything from opening with no restrictions to keeping everything closed until a vaccine was available. In the end, she and a majority of the commission voted to adopt the reopening plan put forward by Gov. Laura Kelly.

Hanzlick said that in deciding how to vote, she relied most heavily on the guidance of doctors and epidemiologists in county and state health departments. But she also considered the question often posed by Presiding Bishop Michael Curry: “What would love do?”

She said her faith has helped her decide how best “to offer compassion, care and safety for people with differing ideas of what those values mean.” Having a strong group of women friends from church also helps, she said.

And while dismayed by the level of divisiveness and vitriol shown about Covid-related decisions, she said she has grown a thick skin so she can be at peace with her decisions as she seeks to help people of her county. ☉