

Virtual Worship During COVID-19

Rev. Grace Imathiu was working on the church's response to COVID-19 long before worship was moved from onsite to online. In mid-February she listened to one worshipper's concerns about the virus, and then made sure that we prayed each week for all those affected. On March 1, communion was served with individual cups. On March 8 two physicians spoke to the congregation about the virus and how to protect ourselves and others. Worshippers were asked to avoid direct contact while greeting each other.

On March 11 the news arrived that another Evanston faith community was cancelling worship in response to the positive COVID-19 test of a member there. Pastor Grace reached out to 14 health care workers in the church seeking their wisdom, and immediately received responses encouraging social distancing as the best practice to flatten the curve. As one person wrote: "The decision is probably not whether to close for large gatherings/services but when . . . We must protect each other – Do No Harm."

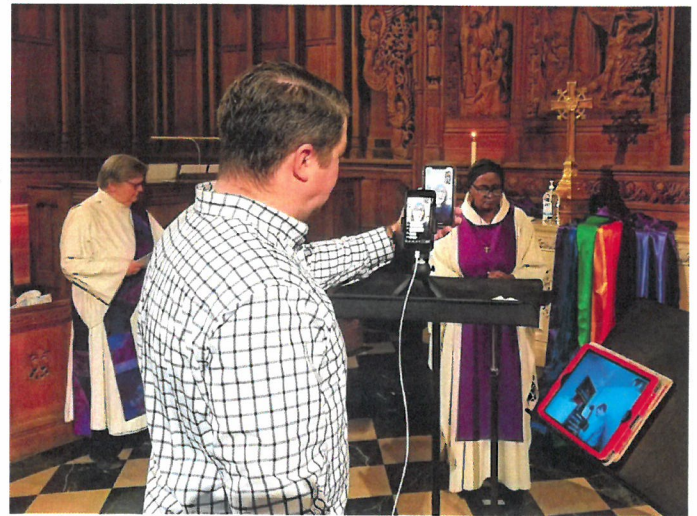
Inside This Issue

- **Soup Kitchen and Bundled Blessings find ways to continue**
- **Church members share how the virus has affected their lives**
- **Face mask makers keep on sewing**

The next day the staff began planning the first ever virtual worship service for Sunday, March 15. At that time Pastor Grace called it "the most difficult decision I have ever made as a pastor" although she knew it was the right one. Then the worship leaders moved ahead to figure out how to "make the best and most awesome virtual worship service" that would be not just bells and whistles but a meaningful experience that would build community.

That first virtual worship service on March 15 was a good but not perfect start. Pastors Grace and Bonny Roth led worship from the sanctuary assisted by church members Jim O'Connell and Calvin Cheema. Pastor Jane Cheema spoke to the children from home. Live music was transmitted via Skype from Minister of Music & Organist Brian Schoettler's Kenosha home. The sound quality was subpar; after that prerecorded pieces were used.

Worship intentionally included (and continues to include) Carry the Flame,



The first virtual worship service on Sunday, March 15, involved social distancing, frequent hand sanitizing, two cell phones, and a tablet. By Easter Sunday, April 12, worship production was smoother and solitary.

the hymn that one child calls "First Church's national anthem." As Brian explains: "This hymn speaks of our history and our identity; none of that ends with quarantine. »

Worship leaders have fallen into a weekly rhythm. The service is planned on Tuesday. Brian records the organ/keyboard parts and sends the audio files out to soloists and choir members. The singers independently record their pieces using that music, and send files back to Brian who carefully "stitches everything together." All of this is completed painstakingly each week, using only the equipment at hand.

Grace Note



Rev. Grace Imathiu

Beloved in Christ,

I have always found my friend Phyllis Tickle helpful when she says that every 500 years there is an upheaval in the Christian world which catapults the church into a new age. According to Tickle we are now smack-dab in the 500 year marker and preparing for the age of the Holy Spirit. The age of the FLAME!

Tickle says the question of authority is at the core of all upheavals. In other words, the question of “who calls the shots?” The Bible? The Bishop? The Book of Discipline? Hence, 500 years ago, challenge to papal authority resulted in the Great Reformation; 500 years earlier, Christianity split in the two divisions of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox in the Great Schism; 500 years earlier was the decline of the Roman Empire and The Great Transition under Gregory the Great; 500 years earlier was the birth of

Christianity. Put on your seat belt, we won the 500 year ticket!

For Tickle, in this 500 year season we have the responsibility of asking hard questions and testing our religious traditions and spiritual practices. What no longer

works or serves to deepen our life with God will have to go. Tickle compares this activity to a giant church rummage sale. True to rummage sales, the giant church rummage sale is filled with conversation and conflict between family members on what is essential and what is not. I am reminded of the rummage sale at General Conference! Up for rummage are certain methods of biblical interpretation, theological understandings that hurt the planet, doctrines, traditions, plans, protocols, the Book of Discipline, and binary language, to name a few.

Speaking of rummage sales, we were once known for our amazing rummage sale which brought a hefty sum for our missions budget. When the rummage sale itself was rummaged, missions definitely felt the hit. However, the space is becoming Daisy’s Place which is an amazing leap of faith.

When it comes to rummage sale, First Church can easily say “been there, done that.” Indeed our congregation’s

anthem is an invitation for all of us to welcome the Holy Spirit whose image is a flame. So we sing and encourage each other saying “carry the flame, sister, brother and sibling, living the faith; passing the praise from one generation to another.” As I pray for the flame you are carrying, I wonder **Where is God Calling You?** Please take the survey and let us explore together. We are were brought together for a times as this.

Sheltered in God’s love,

—Grace Imathiu
Senior Pastor



Soup Kitchen, Diaper Pantry Adapt and Continue Serving

Soup Kitchen

"All of the faith organizations of Evanston are committed to keeping the soup kitchens going. When our building closed, we knew we just had to find another way," says Tina Kalil of the Mission and Outreach Committee who oversees our soup kitchen.

With the closing of the First Church, the Thursday soup kitchen was given permission to operate out of the First Congregational Church Meeting House just south on Hinman Avenue. There is no cooking or meal prep done at that site. As with all the other soup kitchens in Evanston, the meal is typically prepared elsewhere or, more often, purchased from a local restaurant.

"Do no harm" in this case means not providing the kind of hospitality our soup kitchen normally does. Volunteers and guests all practice social distancing in the new "grab and go" format as guests pick up a pre-packaged meal and then move along. Volunteer Beth Ruppe says there is less contact than at the grocery store.

Thanks to efforts by Connections for the Homeless many of our usual soup

kitchen guests are now temporarily housed in local hotels and also receive meals there. Compared to a pre-pandemic count of 80-100 meals each week, Tom Scott reports that now we are serving 30+ guests a week. Many of those guests, Tina points out, have non-temporary housing but are still in great need of food, and "this may be the only meal a person receives that day."

Bundled Blessings Diaper Pantry

Each month our Bundled Blessings diaper pantry sends 22,000 diapers out into the community to families that need them to keep their infants and toddlers safe and dry — an estimated one in three families. As the National Diaper Bank Network website states: "Public health never mattered more."

With the church closed, April was rough, but the Bundled Blessings team figured out ways to receive deliveries and do the necessary packing of diapers into 50-piece bundles offsite. The social service agencies are also trying to do their work despite closed buildings; most hand off the diaper bundles in a parking lot. Bundled Blessings received a bit of a break in

late April when church leadership deemed the diaper pantry "essential" and gave the team permission to work out of the church building, providing that stringent safety restrictions are followed at all times. Team members, in family groups, have packed 20,000 diapers for the May delivery date. The partner agencies will pick up 15 minutes apart, with masks and gloves.

Concern again is focused on the larger issue of how COVID-19 is affecting families. "These diapers go to families that have to choose between buying food or diapers," observes co-chair Sue Hagedorn. "The longer this pandemic goes on, the more dire their situations are." She was alarmed to learn that some diapers are on backorder. "It's like the toilet paper for babies," she suggests.

In hindsight, Bundled Blessings' "Grateful Gram," a recently-launched fundraising initiative, is very well-timed. (See www.faithatfirst.webconnex.com/bundledblessings.) After the May delivery date next week, the pantry shelves will be pretty much empty. The team hopes that plans for a large diaper shipment in June can be worked out. As Hagedorn points out, it's a public health issue. "How can we *not* do this?"



First United Methodist Church is a community of Christians inviting all people to grow in their relationship with God and to live their faith in the world.



Life in the Time of COVID-19:



MAX MOY JOHNSON

By March 13, Max Moy Johnson, a first-year engineering student at the University of Illinois, had heard about COVID-19, but he wasn't thinking about the virus as he packed a bag for what he thought would be a spring break week at home in Evanston. A few days later he returned to campus, moved out of his room, and prepared to complete the rest of the semester online from home. "It was a very big shock," Max reports.

Online classes for his general ed and engineering classes began the following week and pretty quickly Max settled into a rhythm: get up about 10 AM, work out, take a shower, eat, then spend all afternoon and evening with Zoom classes, prerecorded class lectures, and homework. Around midnight, he hangs out with friends online.

Although Max has settled into his new routine, he misses being on back on campus, where it is easier to access library resources, find good places to study, and get together to work with classmates. "It is hard to stay focused at home with all the distractions."

What will happen after this spring? Max doesn't know, but he hopes that he won't be taking engineering classes online this fall. Maybe someday he'll look back and think it was kind of interesting to have a time when all his college experience was learning on a screen, "but this is not something I would choose."

JASON LEWIS

As Jason Lewis began to hear about COVID-19 he thought it was similar to other seasonal illnesses. But a few weeks into February, the virus began to affect his work and personal life in big ways.

Jason, a new member, normally works from home in human relations for a nonprofit organization; his position involves supporting employees with resources and training. But in February his job became singularly focused on creating plans for an unprecedented event and fielding employee questions and concerns about COVID-19. At the same time, Jason's spouse, Beth Tipton, began working from home 100% of the time as her office abruptly closed.

Then, the Evanston-Skokie School District announced that schools were closing indefinitely and moving to online learning beginning March 16. "The floodgates began to open," says Jason. The couple has twin sons in second grade.

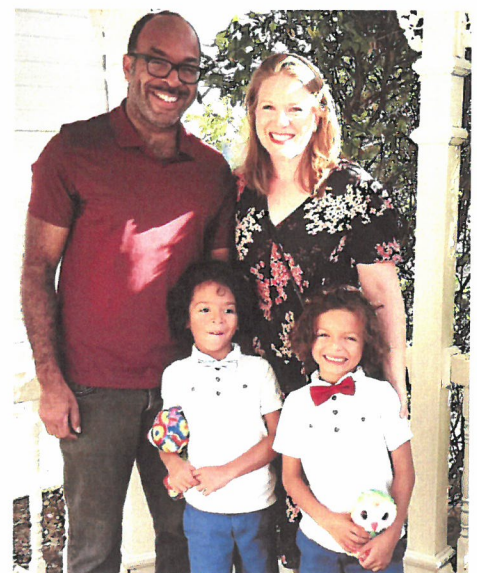
"We had to immediately figure out what work I had to do, what work Beth

needed to do, and how we were going to balance that and fill time with the kids." While the district was sending various resources to parents, Jason and Beth also had to figure out how to provide emotional support to their kids for a situation with no clear answers or end. The first two weeks were crazy.

In early April things got a bit better. The school district offered more structure, clearer expectations and more materials and assignments. Jason's work settled down, and the family got into a rhythm, splitting the "school day" into two-hour shifts with the parents alternating teaching shifts.

How are the boys doing? They miss their friends and teachers, and want to go to the playground. They like school but are watching a lot of videos instead.

How are the parents doing? Jason says he and Beth feel like they are always operating at about 70%. "With both work and my personal life," Jason



Church members share their stories

said, "I never feel 100% focused. It is hard to feel accomplished in anything."

"But we are counting our blessings," says Jason. "We are ok, and I feel grateful that my job allows me to support others."

MARTHA ANN JOHNSON

Martha Ann, who turned 97 last August, was looking forward to her weekly volunteer shift at St. Francis Hospital when she received a call on March 14 informing her there would be no volunteers until further notice. She was debating whether to go to church when another call told her worship was moving online.

Since March 14 Martha Ann, who lives alone, has been inside her Evanston apartment. "I don't go outside—the sidewalks are uneven—but every day I go out in the hallway and walk for 20 minutes."

She particularly misses her weekly volunteer week. For 32 years Martha Ann has helped in the surgical and ICU waiting room at St. Francis Hospital, interacting with families who appreciate her friendly manner and listening ear.

Yet Martha Ann points to the positives of her time sheltering in place. She is expecting a package from a friend's daughter. Her niece and nephew along with church member Greg Pool call her regularly. And, as she says, Bob Roth continues to "take her to church" on Sunday, which now entails Bob calling her and putting his phone on speaker



next to the device streaming virtual worship in the Roth home.

"I have been able to hear the whole service every week. It helps me a great deal. I miss going to church but at least I have that."

CONNIE GILLMAN

Connie Gilman, a participant in our Winter/Spring Inquirers Class, works at Amita Health, St. Francis Hospital. She became aware in January of the COVID-19 outbreak in China, and followed the disease's progression in the U.S. and across the world.

Preparations for the COVID-19 patients moved quickly at St. Francis Hospital. Multidisciplinary teams examined hospital readiness to care for these patients, considering staffing, equipment, supplies, including PPE, and structural changes to accommodate anticipated high numbers.

Connie, an RN, works as a Quality Outcomes Specialist. Working at the onset of the pandemic became intense with many long days. However,

to Connie her intensity paled in comparison to the work of the RNs, physicians, therapists, and others working on the frontline. She understands how exhausting and overwhelming the work is for them. "I am humbled at what is happening on the front line. This is an awful, awful disease."

Each person has a story, Connie reminds us. Maybe a patient ill with this disease has a worried loving family waiting at home, unable to visit and relying on hospital staff with iPads and Face Time to communicate with family. Maybe there is no known family, only a legal guardian. It is heartbreaking, when a patient is ready to be discharged, yet there is no place to go for continued care and healing.

In the midst of it all, Connie sees hope: in the dedication of health workers and in the "mission moment" of a huddle when someone lifts up a prayer or three good things they've observed. She finds it especially hopeful that here in Evanston a population of persons who struggle to get quality health care are treated by such compassionate heroes.



Responding to COVID-19 with Needles and Thread

The face mask project began in late March when Melissa Lindner saw a Facebook post that included a simple pattern and tutorial for making a cloth face mask. A sewer since she was 12, Melissa decided to give it a go. Shortly after that Pastor Grace reached out to ask if she and Nancy Rose would sew face masks that could be distributed to church members who wanted them.

As Nancy recalls, at that point there wasn't consensus about the effectiveness of masks and not yet mandates about wearing them in public. But she certainly had time and loved the idea of a project that would help address her own feelings of anxiety and helplessness around the virus outbreak.

Initially it took about 20 minutes for each mask, which is an eight-step process made longer because they have had to make cloth ties. (Elastic, like toilet paper, has been incredibly difficult to find.) Nancy and Melissa each



have found ways to make the process more efficient. As this issue goes to press the duo, along with church members Cate Whitcomb and Laura Mills, have made nearly 300 masks—and have no intent of stopping anytime soon.

"I get up in the morning and try to do some cutting or sewing. Some days that is all I can do," reports Nancy. "Everyone has some anxiety about this pandemic. Making masks helps me feel better, less anxious, and it is nice to think that this could possibly save a life or help someone else feel less anxious."

Completed face masks are washed, dried, ironed, and then packaged individually while wearing a mask and gloves. First Church volunteers have collaborated with Evanston's Grace Lutheran Church members to identify organizations that can help distribute the masks where they are needed. Masks have been given to Hilda's Place shelter guests, Interfaith Action soup kitchen guests, a local fire station, and too many others to list.

Pastor Grace delivered 50 to Gyros Planet & Taqueria, a storefront restaurant across from Evanston Township High School that gives away free meals and masks as needed. Nancy is working on a batch of masks that will go to an organization for pregnant



Melissa Lindner poses with her grandsons, 9 and 12, who helped cut the fabric for these face-masks. Much of the material she has used for masks have come from the First Church rummage sale.

moms who are nearing their delivery dates.

As of May 1 face masks or face coverings are required in Illinois in public places, a mandate that went into effect in Evanston on April 23. The group continues to explore ways to get the masks out to the local community.

Anyone with extra fabric, thread, elastic (only 1/4 or 1/8 inch) or elastic cord, or sewing skills or time to help with cutting is encouraged to reach out to Nancy Rose by email to frankandnan1@sbcglobal.net.

Melissa, who is normally out and about during the week, appreciates the chance to "to good" with her extra time at home. And that large stash of fabric leftover from the First Church rummage sale is going to very good use.

Finance Committee Offers Update

The Finance Committee, which pledged to provide more transparency on the financial health of First Church throughout the year, offers this update.

First, we would like to thank each one of you who has been honoring your pledge and making contributions to First Church. During the first quarter of the year the Church giving has exceeded 2019's Q1 giving in excess of \$60,000. Our expenses in the first quarter have been consistent with our approved budget. This is truly good news and we appreciate how everyone has embraced our new style of community, gathering and giving during this trying time.

Also, the Church applied through our bank for funds under the Payroll Protection Plan for both the Church and Total Child Preschool (in our building). We received approval from the SBA (U.S. Small Business Administration) and received funds on April 30.

Please continue to honor your pledge and by continuing with your financial contributions to the church. Your offering and pledge contributions can be made online at www.faithatfirst.webconnex.com/offering, set up via your bank's online



payment system, or snail mailed to First UMC, 516 Church St., Evanston IL 60201.

Thank you!

Rebecca Smith, Chair

Virtual Worship, continued from cover

The sermon, prayers, children's message, compiled music pieces, and other worship components – about 20 separate pieces each week – are handed over to Calvin Cheema. Calvin adjusts audio levels, imports files into an editing program, adjusts transitions between clips, and then finally uploads the finished product to YouTube and Facebook. A fair bit of problem solving is typically involved.

With his background in programming and data science, Calvin is no stranger to spending time in front of a computer, although this kind of production work is new to him. He thinks the most important quality he brings to the task, however, is being a

night owl. The entire process, which initially took 12 hours each week, is down to about eight – and most of it happens in the wee hours.

Holy Week and Easter, including two of our biggest Sundays plus three additional unique worship services, were especially demanding this year. For worship leaders it was particularly important to “show the best of what we can do.” Brian points to the number of people involved on Palm Sunday and Easter, including 16 different voices for the Hallelujah Chorus, as a good example of the additional effort: “That’s a lot of stitching together.”

Has virtual worship been meaningful and led to community building? We think so. The congregation (and the 41 new visitors since March 15) have responded positively, posting lovely comments and greetings on YouTube, Facebook, and in the welcome folder. Our virtual worship attendance average of 258 is not far off our in-person numbers for 2019.

Plans at this point are to continue some form of virtual worship even after we return to in-person worship. “We will have learned some things from functioning in this time that will inform how we worship in the future,” say Brian. “It will be a glorious day when we can get back to the sanctuary.”

516 CHURCH STREET
EVANSTON, IL 60201
(847) 864-6181
WWW.FAITHATFIRST.COM



NEWS AND NOTES FROM FIRST CHURCH

GC 2020 POSTPONED

General Conference 2020, the large gathering of over 900 United Methodist delegates has been postponed to 2021. The specific dates have not been finalized. The Pastor's Advisory Team (PAT) has reconvened and is working to figure out the best way to provide resources, updates, and educational opportunities to the congregation during this time of shelter in place. Please feel free to contact PAT at PAT@faithatfirst.com with any questions or concerns.

DAISY'S PLACE ON HOLD

The work of our congregation and Connections for the Homeless to

create a shelter for women on the lower level of the church has been paused for a prolonged period as Connections for the Homeless leads the effort to deliver essential services to persons experiencing homelessness during the pandemic. The Mission and Outreach Committee and Board of Trustees look forward to resuming the work when the situation allows.

ONLINE LEARNING AND FELLOWSHIP

Many of our classes and groups have moved their activity to Zoom or another online platform. Check the website calendar at www.faithatfirst.com/events/.



Please continue to send your "Postcards from Home" to mary@faithatfirst.com or leave us a note in the online welcome folder so we can include it in the weekly e-news.