

Pastor's Report
June 17, 2020
Rev. Jessica Margrave Schirm

I recently saw a headline from the Onion or a similar parody publication that read: *The United States Now Entering the Fourth Phase of Pretending the COVID - 19 Pandemic is Over.*

I'm feeling this cognitive dissonance quite a bit as so much of our state and many of our towns begin the move back to "normal" while the data doesn't yet seem to support doing so. I found myself struggling with the reality that life must go on - I have family out of state that is still in crisis/bereavement mode and needs my presence and support; my work as a pastor is more efficient when I am in person with our staff and when I have access to the resources in my office space; the urgency of the social revolution proclaiming Black Lives Matter demands collaborative action, some of which requires our actual bodies in the streets or at the vigils in the sanctuary or at the memorial on the church lawn - while acknowledging that NOT gathering in person for worship for a long time yet is still the best, most loving, most just practice we can embrace. I feel the tension between an ongoing need to keep adjusting how we imagine worship and community building from a safe social distance while acknowledging that Zoom, and pre-recorded sermons and songs, and facebook live fatigue is real...and yet, what else might we do? Some of this report will address my thoughts around this conundrum and I am open to your thoughtful feedback and brain-storming as we move forward.

Staff Updates

For the first time in over three months, our entire staff was able to be together for a (masked/socially distanced) in person staff meeting! How good it was to see each other's faces NOT on a computer screen. A good chunk of our conversation was about how to best live out our mission and vision as a church through socially distanced worship and wider community engagement while continuing to foster a sense of connection and communion. Elizabeth and Bill continue to work their usual schedules (the church office is open M-F 9-3); Erin and Pastor Jessica continue a balance of working from home and the church office as needed and Ken continues to come to the church office once a week.

As noted in a previous report, Ken is currently working only half of his regularly scheduled hours and has acknowledged that the current technological platforms for worship are beyond his skill set or desired learning curve. Ken has suggested taking an extended leave of absence. I will be having ongoing conversations with Ken around what this might look like, how it plays into his plans for retirement and would be eager to hear from the Music Ministry Task Force how our worship through music might be capitalized upon during this season of virtual worship.

Time off/Take two - I attempted to take some time off at the end of May and beginning of June but due to the urgency and priority of the Virtual Vigil for George Floyd I wound up cutting my travel time in half and worked via phone, text, email and Zoom for the majority of the time I was able to be out of town. So...I am going to try again to take an actual (non-working) vacation and will be out of town July 3-10th.

Pastoral Care/Worship/Ministry Updates

I continue to connect with our church community via email, phone call, social media, hand written note, etc. Several folks have had pastoral care needs related to health issues and I have done my best to stay connected in these cases. As we imagine what virtual worship might look like going forward, I would like to send out a survey gleaning insight as to what is and isn't resonating with folks. I welcome your feedback on what should be included. After a recent touch base with ACM Jonna Jensen, I am even more convinced that moving to a pre-recorded, video style of worship (even just the sermon at this point) is going to become common practice for our faith communities long after the days of social distancing are behind us. I am currently moving in this direction for sermons at least. In addition to the ongoing evolution of the virtual worship, I am going to host a Zoom fellowship time on 6/28 at 11:30 and would like to do a brief, in person, socially distanced BYOC(communion) service on the church lawn on 7/12 (delayed one week from our usual communion Sunday due to the holiday) and 8/2 at 8:30 am to beat the heat. Erin and I are brainstorming ways to re-engage our Christian Education programs (Seekers, Godly Play, Connect) in some virtual format in anticipation of the start of the program year in September.

Wider Denomination Updates

Part of my work as your pastor includes the ways I serve and partner with our wider denomination, specifically the Iowa Conference of the United Church of Christ. I am currently a member of the Committee on Ministry for the Central Association which reviews ministerial standing and approves, confers, ordains folks coming and in and out of our association. I have recently been invited to be the nominee for the position of Moderator for the 2021 Iowa Conference Annual Meeting which, if elected, will require being a part of the board of directors for the next year. And I have recently agreed to be a facilitator for a newly formed Clergy Covenant Group beginning soon (the CCG that I have been a part of has dissolved due to ministers moving out of the area so it is a good time for me to switch gears and begin facilitating a group under the guidance and recommendation of our conference ministers.) Much of this work is work that happens on evenings and weekends and out of the sidelines of our congregation. I'm grateful for this opportunity for ministerial connection and to serve the wider church in these meaningful ways.

Thank you for your continued leadership. I am so grateful that we are not only a team but also a family of faith.

With Grace and Peace,

Pastor Jessica