

State of the Church

It's hard to believe that when I gave the State of the Church, aka Rector's report at the annual meeting at the end of January last year we had barely heard of COVID 19. And even into February we didn't think it would need much more planning than being sure that there was enough soap and paper towels for more frequent hand washing and providing for people who chose not to come to church during flu season.

As a matter of fact, in January and February last year we were making plans for ways to expand our programming and outreach to our community. We had an experimental Dinner Church program in January, unfortunately the Bills play-off game ended up being scheduled at the same time, so we were planning another. We started a Hygiene Closet at School 6 to provide our kids with items they needed from period supplies, to combs, to soap and shampoo. We had several Tourist in Our Hometown events scheduled to explore places in our area that many of us hadn't visited yet. Our acolytes participated in the Diocesan Feast of Lights service at St. Paul's Cathedral. We were holding regular Pub Theology sessions to get together to talk about God, spiritual topics and to have some fun together. In late February we moved our traditional pancake supper from Shrove Tuesday to the Sunday before Ash Wednesday and our first "Shrove Sunday" Pancake Breakfast was a big hit, with games and prizes as well as delicious pancakes.

We were looking at ways to reach out to be prepared for the new housing and commercial developments that were planned for our surrounding area, including a major redevelopment of the Eastern Hills Mall area. We were exploring ways to take the spirit of St. Paul's on the road to be prepared to be a presence to our soon to be new neighbors.

We were finishing up the renovation of the Library and Choir Room. In fact, the finishing touches were put on those rooms after the pandemic hit, so most of you have not had the opportunity to see them yet.

We had received a \$1000 Evangelism Grant from the Episcopal Church to start a You Tube Chanel and were in the process of planning the kind of content that we would want to create and feature.

And then March 15 happened. Bishop Rowe declared that in response to the global pandemic all worship and other in-person gatherings would be suspended. We weren't sure then how long that would last. I remember standing in the parking lot of Harris Hill Elementary School helping the staff hand out school work and devices to students for at home learning and saying that I was fairly sure we wouldn't be able to worship in person at Easter, but I was planning a big Pentecost celebration at the end of May. You know the old saying, we make plans and God laughs.

It was a Holy Week and Easter unlike any most of us have ever experienced. We worshipped on Facebook and Vimeo. With help from our friends at the Cheesy Chick Café we distributed palms to the community. We bagged up our, already stuffed, Easter Eggs and dropped them off

at the houses of parish families and Harris Hill families, providing socially distanced Easter Egg Hunts to more than 50 households.

We have moved our worship to digital platforms. We broadcast our worship on Facebook and Vimeo. Originally, we were broadcasting live. There were a few bumps in the road, including an early worship service that broadcast sideways and my cat making more than one appearance. We have since moved to premiering a pre-recorded video which allows us to include music in our services. We have seen the numbers of devices watching or digital worship average between 75 & 90. The accepted metric is that for every device watching your video, assume between 1.5 and 2 people are watching. Given that we can assume that between 112 and 180 people are participating in our digital worship each week. We know that we are reaching some people with our digital worship who we wouldn't be able to reach in person. We know that we have some people new to our community engaging with our digital worship. It seems that continuing digital worship after the pandemic is something we should strongly consider.

We were able to resume a modified in-person worship in the late summer and early fall. We cordoned off pews to maintain social distancing, required masks, removed books & papers & Kleenex boxes from the pews, stopped congregational signing, designed a shorter service with socially distanced communion distribution and put up hand sanitizer stations. With rising virus numbers, Bishop Rowe again suspended public worship in November. It isn't clear when we will be able to resume our modified in-person worship.

There are some of our members who aren't able to participate in digital worship and for those parishioners each month we mail a service that they can use at home.

In the early months of the pandemic our vestry members divided up the congregation and reached out to each household to help stay in contact. In the past several months I have been sending postcards to households just to let you know that I continue to think about and care for you.

We have figured out ways to move some of our programming to digital or other platforms.

We did at home Mission Day Camps in July and August. The July Mission Day Camp involved making blankets for Project Linus. The August Mission Day Camp involved raising awareness and taking action about food insecurity and hunger in our nation and our community.

We started Puzzle Box at St. Paul's. It is basically a puzzle version of a Little Free Library. People are invited to drop off puzzles they are finished with or pick up a puzzle. It has been very popular both with St. Paul's members and our wider community. Liz and I see someone at the puzzle box almost every day.

We did a drive through Trick or Treat at Halloween with an appearance by Maleficent and the Mad Hatter. We gave away over 300 treat bags to friends and neighbors.

We have been doing Sunday School in a Bag every month since September. We have been sending home lessons and activities every month. If you want to have Sunday School lessons delivered to your home, let the parish office know.

We postponed our annual Chicken BBQ & Basket Auction which was planned for May. We were hoping to be able to have it in September, but that wasn't possible. So, under the guidance of Tim Pazda, we pivoted to just a Chicken BBQ in September. It was a lot of fun and we made more than \$4,000 in profit. The baskets are in safe storage waiting for a time when we can have a basket auction again.

We offered Advent in a Box and Epiphany at Home activities to all households and are planning the same kind of Lent in a Bag offering that we have done the past couple of years to provide some spiritual activities you can do at home for each liturgical season.

Our Bible Study group has moved to Zoom and we continue to post the audio recordings of the sessions on our podcast site. We also have been doing book groups on Zoom and have read a wide variety of books on many different subjects.

We have increased our offerings on our Instagram and Facebook pages. Including 50 Words of Easter where we posted a meme for a word about the Gospel reading every day from Easter to Pentecost and 12 Hymns of Christmas where we linked to a video of a Christmas Carol for each of the days between Christmas and Epiphany. We are working on offerings for Lent right now. If you are on Facebook or Instagram follow our pages. If you think you might be good at making memes let Pastor Vicki know.

We launched our You Tube channel with recordings of the stories that make up the Jesse Tree. The Jesse Tree is a series of Bible stories that trace the relationship between God and human beings from Creation through the birth of Jesus. We are posting one story a week recorded by several different people. You can find a link to our YouTube Channel in the This Week e-newsletter.

Youth Group moved mostly on to Zoom, although we were able to have a few in-person meetings this fall. The kids have also been doing Round Robin Letters where the kids mail letters from one to another with each adding a piece. We were able to have a few Pokemon Club meetings this fall and are hoping to be able to resume that again soon. We started a group called St. Paul's Kids for younger kids to offer an opportunity to play some games and have some fun.

The Senior Christmas Luncheon was obviously not going to be able to be held. We originally planned a socially distanced Christmas Tea but rising virus numbers made even that unwise, so we had a drive-through Christmas Tea where people drove through to pick up a tea cup filled with goodies and get a wave and a "Merry Christmas".

We tried to continue our outreach activities as much as we could. We provided banners to Harris Hill Elementary to celebrate the 5th graders during their drive-through materials drop off. The banners were used to welcome the kids back to school in the fall. We are also working with the

school psychologist at Harris Hill Elementary help a few families at the school who need support.

We were able to fill 200 backpacks with school supplies for School 6 so that our kids had the supplies they needed for virtual school this fall and this December we were able to continue our 8 year tradition of providing a new book for every child in the school as well as hats, gloves and scarves for the kids.

We participated in the Walk Off Hunger for FeedMore WNY and provided a location for their holiday drive-through fundraiser to help support those in our community dealing with hunger and food insecurity.

On a sad note, Lois Potts, who has run the Harris Hill Community Nursery School in the parish hall for more than 40 years decided to retire this fall. The Harris Hill Community Nursery School has met in our parish hall since it was built in the mid-1950's. This September was the first time that we didn't have 3 and 4 year olds coming to school in our parish hall. We hope that we will be able to find another use for our parish hall during the day in the near future.

We lost some beloved members of St. Paul's this year. John Hodson passed away in January, followed shortly thereafter by Mary Hodson. Anna Mae Kraus and Gay Walser died this spring. In October Thomas Russell entered the nearer presence of Christ and in early November Bette Andruscavage, long-time member of St. Paul's entered the nearer presence of Christ. This is the first year in my tenure as rector where we had more funerals than baptisms, although we did have 3 baptisms this year, including Luca Davide, the son of Grace and Jennifer Davide.

Pete Symons and Aaron Macke have given an in-depth report on our finances, but I want to say thank you all for your continued support of St. Paul's. Our pledge income remained basically on budget through the year. Your support in the past meant that we went into the pandemic with nearly a \$30,000 balance in our Operating Fund. That balance and the Employee Retention Tax Credit allowed us to make it through 2020 and to spend what we needed to in order to respond to new ways of worshiping and doing our programming.

The 2021 Budget reflects an expectation of some decreased spending and decreased non-pledge income, but you all have responded so magnificently that we are not having to make an excessive draw on our savings.

We had some damage to our steeple during a windstorm this spring. The majority of that damage was covered by our insurance, but in the course of repairing that damage we discovered some rot on the steeple that will have to be repaired this spring, which won't be covered by insurance. Also, we will need to replace the front doors of the church, which are deteriorating due to exposure to the weather. These will be two major expenses, but we do have funds in both our Capital Fund and Memorial Fund which will help off-set those costs. We had planned to refurbish or replace the sign in front of the church, but that may need to be postponed due to these other building needs.

That brings us to plans for the future. If I have learned anything during the last 10 months it is that plans need to be kept flexible, because we aren't sure what will happen next.

It seems unlikely that we will resume in-person worship of any kind before the end of February. Ash Wednesday is February 17. At this point, I am planning Ashes to Go drive through hours in the morning and evening as well as having ashes available in the office during the day. That does depend on what the virus numbers are at that point. Watch the This Week e-news for updated information as we get closer to that day. I will be posting digital worship for Ash Wednesday on Facebook and Vimeo.

We will be doing Lent in a Bag and a Lent Education event on Zoom.

Beyond that, I can't really say much about Spring plans. It depends on how quickly and how broadly the vaccine is distributed and what happens with the infection numbers. I assume that at some point this spring we will be able to resume in-person worship in the modified way that we were able to in the fall.

I am hopeful that we will be able to have some socially distanced outdoor activities this summer and resume something that looks more like our normal congregational life in the fall. I want to end with some Thank Yous.

First to our parish administrator, Liz Brauza-Hughes. Throughout this crazy time Liz has worked incredibly hard to help find new ways of making things work. She has researched options, tracked down supplies, assembled hundreds of mailings and generally been amazing at everything that I or anyone else has asked of her. I should mention that in the midst of the pandemic we had to move our web-site to a different platform and took the opportunity to completely overhaul it and the vast majority of that work fell on Liz's plate. Thank you so much for everything, Liz.

Pete Symons has served as chair of our finance committee for more than a decade. Pete has been the calm hand guiding our finances. We are in the good financial shape that we are because of Pete's guidance. Pete is stepping down as finance chair. He will remain on the finance committee to help our new finance chair, Bonnie Sunday as she picks up the task. Thank you so much Pete.

Tim Pazda is finishing a second term as warden (and served a few years on vestry before that). Tim's ideas, energy, get it done attitude and humor have added so much to our life as a community the last few years. I'm sure that we will still be able to count on Tim for all of that, but I will miss having him at vestry meetings. Thank you so much, Tim.

Beth Ulatowski is finishing her term on vestry. Beth is a school social worker at School 6 and much of our relationship with the school is because of her willingness to help open doors for us. Beth has brought a calm voice and a caring presence to the leadership of St. Paul's. Thank you, Beth.

Kate Macke is stepping down as chair of the Stewardship Committee. Kate has organized and led our annual stewardship campaigns for the last few years with good humor and great organization. Marc Zeigler is picking up the mantle of Stewardship chair and will benefit from Kate's work the last few years. Thank you so much Kate.

Lastly to all of you. Thank you so much for your thoughts, prayers, cards and patience as I have dealt with my mother's death and everything that came along with that. I appreciate all of you and can't wait until we can worship and play and eat together again.