

## **Church during a Pandemic: What Started as Virtual I Now Recognize as Vital**

### **October 2020**

Back in March when we first shut down in-person worship and other gatherings of our congregations I looked at the quick pivot we had to make as a transition to Virtual Church. At University UCC in Seattle the first week or two of taking Sunday morning on-line consisted of a small cadre of worship leaders and a few videographer / techies coming together in our empty sanctuary to put out a real-time service for our congregants to watch from their places of shelter. We were trying to give everyone an experience that was as close as we could get to the feel of being physically together in our church building. What resulted was not bad, but many of us felt that it seemed to focus on trying to re-create what was not possible given the constraints of the pandemic we faced. Showing the chancel without our choir and seeing views from our balcony showing the empty pews were all too real reminders of what all of us were missing.

In those early days of physical separation, the news media spoke of the wide range of community activities and gatherings that were being cancelled due to COVID-19. These included many references to churches having had to “close”. I have a strong memory from our UCUC Church Council meeting in the middle of March (the first one conducted via Zoom) of a wise statement shared by our clergy making clear that, “We are not closed and never have been nor will be closed!” That reassurance was an important launching point for me in moving forward on this uncertain path with conviction and purpose. It was a call to the old rallying cry of: “When the going gets tough, the tough get going!”

What has evolved since those uncertain March days has been a re-envisioning of what church looks like and what role it needs to play in the lives of our congregants and the wider world. The UCUC on-line services that go live on YouTube and Facebook each Sunday at 10am have embraced the opportunity to take church well beyond the walls of our sanctuary. We have material created out in nature, in people’s homes, and through the skills of technicians who coordinate music and dance with many participants offering their parts from different spaces and times. Our weekly services have taken on a sense of energy and vitality that may be difficult to match when we are finally able to gather safely in our sanctuary on Sunday mornings!

Another aspect of church that has become important as the period of the physical separation drags on is adjusting the types and levels of support that we provide for each other. Some of our congregants who were able to live independently before COVID-19 now find themselves needing help with daily tasks. Many have needed help navigating the technology challenges of being as connected as possible. All of us need the support of community to weather the stress of the changes that have come our way via the limitations and constraints imposed by this pandemic.

For me, the single most important organization for facing these challenging times is church. It is through church that I am both fed the living waters that I need and find opportunity to be a conduit for sharing those waters with other. God is definitely still speaking, yelling in fact, and it is heartening to see so many within UCC listening, embracing, and acting to Do Justice, Love Kindness, and Walk Humbly with God and all God's people.

In these rapidly evolving times I challenge each of us to revisit the ways that we are stewards of God's world and God's people. It is likely that the needs of the communities where you find yourself are different from what they were a year ago. Similarly, the changes in your own life may mean your abilities to contribute both time and finances have changed. Be grace-filled as you discern how and how much you can offer. Listen for God's call for action that comes to each of us through so many different channels. Seek advice from those in the church that you know and trust. Please join me in continuing the vitality of the UCC at the local, conference, and national levels. We need God and God needs us now more than ever. Be the Vital Church!

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