Covid Web Copy 2

LORNA WITH THE MAIN STORY – please include a paragraph:

Marijke Fakasiieiki, The Fig Tree’s development director, surveyed rural congregations in the region and gathered stories for this summer issue on the impact of COVID and vaccinations on their ministries.

Pioneer UMC weathers the pandemic

Pioneer UMC followed guidelines from bishop to weather COVID

P: Pioneer UMC continued having food drives throughout the pandemic. Pioneer held a summer Vacation Bible School.

Juli Reinholz, pastor at Pioneer United Methodist Church (UMC) in Walla Walla, believes the congregation has weathered the worst of the storm.

“In response to COVID, as with everything, we followed our bishop of Greater Northwest UMC guidelines as best we could for 14 months, so the building was closed, but the ministry was not.”

Members continued as best they could with ministries in ways that were safe, following guidelines from the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the governor and bishop.

Their last in-person worship was in March 2020 and the first in-person worship in the building was Sunday, May 2, 2021.

While the building was closed, Juli said they focused on how to stay connected with members. The health ministry team made hundreds of phone calls.

“We livestreamed worship services, and for those without electronics I sent sermons,” said Juli, who also put the sermon and parts of the worship out on on the phone.

The church mailed letters and treats for children. Using “Godly Play” for Sunday School, teachers put lessons online and sent packages to children to keep connected.

“Ministries while we were not in the building connected people as best they could in multiple ways,” Juli said.

Pioneer UMC looked at its ministries to make them safe for everybody. The elementary school was reactivated and refashioned during COVID.

“We started Walla Walla speaks with the City of Walla Walla, holding online conversations on social justice issues, like immigrant rights, Black Lives Matter and domestic violence,” she said. “Webinars were open to the entire city, trying to connect with the realities of what was going on.”

The church’s choral music closed but continued music in audio production.

“We looked at what we were doing to find the core of what was important in this ministry, and redesigned or reactivated it in ways that helped us continue to reach out and do what the community needs,” Juli said. “We didn’t lose anything.”

The associate pastor, Liv Gibbons, created a VBS program virtually for children and youth.

Juli guessed in May that 80 to 85 percent of members were vaccinated based on phone calls or running into people, who talked about being happy to be vaccinated. She expects the 20 percent who have not been vaccinated likely will be, including young people. She has met few anti-vaxxers.

“It is an emotional thing for those vaccinated. They are pleased to be able to go out, and think if they catch COVID it won’t kill them,” she said.

At first, vaccines were hard to schedule. Juli sits on a vaccination equity committee and was part of conversations on how to use local hotspots to make sure they reached people who might not come to a mass vaccination center. Now such centers are closing.

The city and county used the county fairgrounds nearby, then added two more vaccination sites, and now pharmacies and doctors are vaccinating people, as well as mobile sites.

Nurses in the church showed videos in gratitude moments, speaking of the positive effects of vaccination. Pioneer UMC also used newsletter articles, links to online articles and weekly e-mails with doctors’ testimonies. Health professionals in congregation shared in the education.

Public Health, the city and the hospital connected for education on vaccines in an online webinar.

Those who are vaccinated, have gained “confidence to step out of their homes, end their isolation and engage with people. Some are still hesitant, for some people it will take more time,” Juli said. “I still see them social distancing, not rushing to hug each other, and wearing masks. It is lovely to see people go from a fear base to confidence, move on, knowing they have weathered the worst.”

Juli reviewed what happened in outreach to the community.

Walla Walla has a sleep center offering full-time housing for homeless. The church does a weekly free meal for them. When the COVID lock down hit, most homeless ended up in the sleep center, and the county found ways to feed them.

To continue their ministry serving a free lunch once a week, the community decided to distribute at one location, offering lunches in paper bags on a smaller scale to older people without engaging in person.

They also continue to collect food for the food bank, but distributed it at several large food banks in town, where the National Guard distributed food. With numbers of people who are food insecure, the church continued to share.

The church began to use its bus after mid-May to transport people to the half-capacity, in person worship.

Pioneer UMC also used its connection with the Immigrant Rights Coalition to set up a vaccination clinic.

When the Walla Walla River flooded in February 2020, the church worked with others to create a long-term response team.

“We connected with the UMC for a grant to help people flooded out, but when COVID hit, it took funds that would have helped people recover from the flood,” said Juli.

The church received a grant of $12,500 From the Pacific Northwest Conference of the United Methodist Church, which the church matched for flood victims with long term recovery,” she explained.

“Our congregation learned that we are never alone. God never leaves us alone. There is always a way for us to grow together,” Juli said.

“Many could not see how we could worship through livestreaming. We learned we don’t have to be in the building for spiritual growth,” she said.

“Outreach reminds us of needs of the community outside our building so we don’t always need the building,” she said.

Juli said church is going to change.

“We don’t know what it’s going to look like. We can pivot and learn new ways of doing things. It might be strange to begin with. We don’t do this alone. We do it with the Spirit. We can pivot, change and walk through storms together. We can do it and we will be ok,” Juli said.

For information, call 525-1870 or visit pioneerww.org.

COVID helps church see deep faith roots

COVID helps St. Paul Lutheran in Colville see that God does provide

P: St. Paul Lutheran in Colville prepared sack lunches for feeding program in COVID

The silver lining in COVID is that people involved with St. Paul Lutheran in Colville realize that God does provide, that their roots are deep and that they can withstand these challenges, said Patty Heath, the pastor.

“We did nothing online before this hit. Within four days we were online. Now we can reach some members who for one reason or another can’t come to church. For those who can come to church, we reached families of people who want to join online, and we reconnected with folks shirt tailed in, so folks see that there is a different way to do church,” she said.

The congregation has talked on paper about what it means to be a gathered community of Christ, to celebrate communion and how do that theologically appropriately when they can’t meet together.

“Conversations are an outreach, a way to be together in a meaningful way, which is important to who we are as a church, especially when we can’t gather in person,” Patty said.

“We are pretty inventive when we have to be. God seems to provide a way,” she said.

COVID has affected all the church does—worship life, small groups, Bible studies, staff concerns, men’s breakfast, book discussion, quilting group, youth ministry, nursery care, vacation Bible school, building usage and meeting space for city groups.

“Church groups used to have difficulty finding space,” she said. “We have not been allowing outside groups to use our building.

“It’s been crazy. Everything has been new since March 16 of last year,” she said.

“We did remote worship, no groups met and no ecumenical partners. In the phases, we opened and closed things and had to shift,” she said.

Ecumenical work in Colville has changed, too, including the feeding ministry with other congregations.

Two or three times a year, churches would worship together. They also collaborated with agencies on a summer food program for school children and have a community garden.

Everything closed for a while except for the homeless lunch where five churches took turns to prepare a hot meal, Patty said.

Previously they helped serve a hot lunch once a month in person with fellowship and connecting people with resources. Then they prepared sack lunches they handed out with one person in building at a time.

For the Thanksgiving dinner, they worked with the health department to serve the meal to one person at a time going in and out of the building.

When interviewed, Patty estimated that half of the congregation was vaccinated. Stevens County as at 35 percent, saying local attitudes run the gambit from adamant vaxxers and to adamant anti-vaxxers.

The health department across the street has offered vaccinations and information.

“We have provided information and worked with folks trying to get them vaccinated,” Patty said, noting that education is informal in “hanging out with people.”

Since she got her vaccine, more church folks have been vaccinated.

“Our policies follow the health department, so we wear masks in the building. That has been hard for some. We are a fairly small congregation, which has allowed people to come back.”

In the community, Patty sees more homelessness but less food insecurity, because people are using the food bank and feeding programs. SNAP and other relief benefits went up and more are on WIC cards, so at risk families do not need the food and lunch programs as much.

While food insecurity has gone down, Patty is concerned for people using CARES Act and other emergency funds that when those funds end many may be in desperate need.

“Housing is expensive and nearly impossible to come by,” she added, telling of agencies having long lists of people looking for affordable rentals and expecting that in housing people will be desperate when extra funds are gone.

She trusts that with that awareness and as God has provided a way for the church to find new ways to work, God will provide a way for the church and community to respond.

For information, call 684-2432 or email revsplccolv@gmail.com.

Anonymous survey finds 94 percent vaccinated

Unity Spiritual Center May anonymous survey found 94 percent vaccinated

P: Unity Spiritual Center held Zoom board of trustees gatherings.

Before COVID, Unity Spiritual Center in Spokane had in-person and virtual services, Sunday youth ministry, an active volunteer program, a barista stand, a bookstore, Spirit Groups, music fundraisers, a choir program, a chaplain program, in-person book studies and a meditation service.

They added a zoom meet and greet after virtual services called Reflections, Observations and Inspirations (ROI), zoom youth ministry events and connections, zoom Spirit Groups, zoom Book Studies.

They temporarily paused their in-person Sunday youth program, choir program and group singing during services.

Amber McKenzie, interim administrator, said they did not meet in person at the beginning of COVID and livestreamed services successfully.

“We are now meeting in person again at a reduced capacity, masked and socially distanced, as well as maintaining our livestream option,” she said.

The youth ministry returned to Sunday services and welcomed children from four years old to high school age on May 23.

“We have also added back an early meditation service led by volunteers at 9 a.m. for those interested in a smaller spiritual experience,” she said. “Our board of trustees’ reopening priority is to maintain an environment in which everyone feels safe and welcome, regardless of vaccination status.”

In late May, the board conducted an anonymous survey of members and found that 94 percent were fully vaccinated.

“It means many of our higher risk members feel more at ease attending in person and volunteering again. Youth leaders also feel more comfortable volunteering in person,” she said.

“From what I have gathered, most feel the benefits of being vaccinated outweigh the risk of contracting the virus or having adverse side effects from the vaccination,” Amber said.

The center has not done education—neither encouraging or discouraging vaccination—seeing it as a personal decision.

Board president Joan Broeckling believes the pandemic has “called forth greater compassion and caregiving from our congregation. We developed a fund to help members of our community who were struggling with job loss and other financial burdens. We initiated wellness calls to members to stay connected and pray together, and came together to provide meals on an ongoing basis for a longtime member who is ill.

For information, email amckenzie@unityspokane.org or board@unityspokane.org.

Pastor shifted ministry sending letters by ‘snail mail’

Colfax pastor sent sermons, prayers, scriptures and comments by ‘snail mail’

P: Lynn Nelson

Lynn Nelson, pastor of Affirmational United Church of Christ in Colfax, said that because members lacked “fancy cell phones” going online was not a practical option. So when COVID shut the church down, they did church by “snail mail.”

She started mailing a letter with words to two familiar hymns, comments that she called “letter babble” and a worship sheet with prayers, scripture and her sermon.

By “letter babble” she means she shares her thoughts about what is happening in the world and her life.

“Sometimes I’ve shared my thoughts on days I’m spiritually down,” Lynn said. “Often those are the ones I have the most reactions to, because people can identify.”

Lynn found she was touching bases with more people than before. At the eye doctor’s office, she saw a non-church-going parishioner who said, “Oh, I just read your letter.”

The letter goes to 61 people in four states, and she will “never not write it again, because I reach members who are not able to come to church or just don’t come to church.”

In the small, older church, little may seem to be happening, but if there is a need in the community the church would help.

“The people in Colfax are weathering COVID well,” Lynn said. “We are a small community with close connections and family around.”

Lynn herself has roots in Colfax and when the church needed a pastor she stepped in as a lay person and worked to be ordained in the United Church of Christ.

“We’re a small rural community and look out for each other,” she said.

AA stopped meeting in the building for a while, but they are back.

The church has donated food to the local food bank and donated items for the domestic violence shelter.

With many older members, Lynn guessed a good percentage were vaccinated. She knows of only one 90-year-old woman in the church who died of COVID.

“I haven’t heard anybody in congregation speak against it,” Lynn said. “I would think the town would run positive, too, but some may be against it.

Meeting in May with the moderator, they shared that nobody seemed to be in a rush to go back, but as they have learned about more being vaccinated, they have decided to open to in person worship on June 13.

For information, call 208-1088 or email lynn.nelson1945@gmail.com.

Walla Walla church cared for community health

Walla Walla UCC church felt sacred responsibility to care for community health

P: Members prepare for outdoor Easter Sunday Service. / Walla Walla United Church of Christ did a blessing of the animals in May.

At First Congregational United Church of Christ (UCC) in Walla Walla, the whole congregation and board leaders understood that they had “a sacred responsibility to care for the community health of congregation and wider community through the pandemic,” said the pastor Nathaniel Mahlberg.

“Abiding by sound science as it’s emerged about how to be safe, has been an important priority for us,” said the pastor of the 150-member church.

“By checking in on our neighbors, and checking in through ouor calling tree, friendships and relations have been deepened and formed,” he said.

Their priority has been “to be church, do church and care for the spiritual and emotional health and physical health for their people, finding a creative balance.

While no members were sick with COVID, they’ve had close relations become sick and some have unfortunately died, so members were personally impacted.

“Folks have struggled with anxiety, depression, and the emotional and spiritual toll being isolated from one another,” said Nathaniel.

Worshipping online provided a creative possibility. They set up low-wave radio transmitters, and had people come to worship in their cars. They returned to in-person worship with masks, ventilation and social distancing for Pentecost Sunday and restarted small groups.

Nathaniel found that the United Church of Christ Pacific Northwest Conference was helpful, forming online communities for church leaders to help them navigate the pandemic, developing skills in live streaming and discerning the steps forward.

“I’ve benefitted from our denominational support and guidance,” he said. “Being a non-hierarchical church, local congregations decide what we want to do. Our leaders could urge, but not forbid or require.

For a long time, First Congregational UCC shared a food ministry with other churches in town, providing one to two lunches a week. Wednesday is the community lunch. Before the pandemic, they served people in the church dining room until the pandemic hit.

During the pandemic, each church has prepared lunches with a little crew, serving them at an outside central location.

Walla Walla’s Christian ministry organization, Christian Aid Center, stepped up to serve lunches churches prepared and delivered to them.

Leaders of the church ministries, which also has a Sleep Center that provides lunches, connected with the county health department and adjusted how they were doing that so it was as safe as possible.

First Congregational UCC wresteld about the several addiction recovery groups it has hosted. Many adjusted to online meetings, so until recently no group or recovery group were meeting on site.

Two other church-related organizations in town held in-person meetings, but First Congregational has been erring on side of caution, said Nathaniel. It was hard but the groups were resilient stayed in touch.

The church put out surveys in mid-May, so they estimated that 80 to 90 percent of those who attend had had two doses of the vaccine and the remainder “are expecting and intending to get vaccinated,” said Nathaniel.

“Our ‘reopening with care’ taskforce, helped guide our decisions. We have a doctor and a nurse, so we have tried to be objective in assessments. We did not make assumptions or just take anecdotal evidence on whether people had been vaccinated,” he said.

For people who were not on computers or had difficulty to navigating to sign up, members of the congregation helped with that.

“Our people are inclined to trust data-driven medical science and were overjoyed when the vaccines were deemed safe and were available. Some volunteered at vaccination clinics, seeing that as a public service to care for community’s wellness,” said Nathaniel.

For folks who were nervous or reluctant, some members talked them through that.

“Understanding the science behind that is reassuring, I find,” said Nathaniel. “Understanding that medical professionals who developed it have asked the right questions, also reassures.”

Education on vaccinations has been more one-on-one between pastor and congregant talking about it or other members of congregation steppingd forward to help people get vaccinated.

Individuals have volunteered at county effort.

“Vaccination makes a big difference, that has been key in our church determining that we are being wise in returning to in-person worship in the sanctuary,” he said.

“If we weren’t at a place where such a strong level of our people had been vaccinated, it would have been a difficult decision. It would be really difficult for me to learn if somebody contracted a deadly virus because of participating in something at church. I feel responsible to protect their health,” he said.

The congregation is on board.

“God doesn’t demand human sacrifice to worship. I’ve not felt the need to rush it in to do it in an unwise way,” said Nathaniel.

The congregation has been among the privileged in this pandemic with many working folks able to continue to work, either because they are in professions that adapted—health care, education—or working class in sectors like building, farming and health care where they kept their jobs. Folks on fixed incomes were managing, he said.

Stresses in the congregation have been more emotional, psychological, and spiritual.

The eviction moratorium has kept homeless numbers from going up. Those with homes and kitchens who needed food assistance have been going to the food bank. Their numbers have increased. The line is blocks long every week, Nathaniel said.

The lunch program serves those living in more precarious situations.

“The housing market in Walla Walla continues to be bonkers, hard to afford homes, and it has gotten worse over time,” he said, uncertain what’s ahead in housing.

“We have weathered the pandemic ok,” Nathaniel said. “Many churches are struggling because of splits, dividing members on understanding of soundness of vaccinations or whether this pandemic is serious. Our congregation has been on board with treating this seriously and being cautious, careful and creative, and being church for each other,” said Nathaniel.

“I’ve appreciated how deep the roots of our faith are in experiences of upheaval, catastrophe and challenge. The testimonies of the Bible come from challenging times, in which people relied on their experience of how God was at work,” he said.

“We benefit from out roots. Our church community has weathered depressions, world wars and pandemics before. We have a history of resilience. Elder members who experienced World War II have let us know we will get through this together. It’s just another thing to weather, we will be ok,” he said.

“There is a sense of tried and true wisdom I’ve really appreciated. There’s a light at the end of the tunnel,” Nathaniel said. “We’ll just keep moving. People come together to care for each other when times are tough.”

For information, call 525-8753 or email pastor@fcchurch.net.

Zoom ordination led to innovative ‘laying on of hands’

Zoom ordination creates opportunity for innovative ‘laying on of hands’

P: Cloths convey blessing for ‘laying on of hands’ for ordination of Rose Mary Volbrecht during COVID.

While COVID has brought many challenges for faith communities, St. Clare Ecumenical Catholic Communion’s motto has been “be flexible,” said Rose Mary Volbrecht, a co-pastor and emerita professor of philosophy at Gonzaga University.

“Moving to worship on Zoom has spurred some creative adjustments,” she said.

Because singing together on Zoom “produces a cacophony of sound, we eliminated the usual opening song. Instead, we have begun each liturgy with a visual and musical meditation,” she said.

Craig Abbs, a parishioner, produced many opening meditations that highlight the day’s theme and prepare people for worship.

“These opening meditations have been so successful that we can't imagine not using them post-pandemic,” she said.

In February, the communion ordained Rose Mary as a priest with only eight people besides the bishop and her present in person.

“Our custom is to have not only the bishop lay hands on the person being ordained, but also for all members of the congregation to give their blessing by laying hands on the person,” she said. “With most of the congregation present on Zoom, this required some innovation.

“We asked each household in the community to choose a piece of cloth that had meaning for them, pray over it and mail it to the church. During the ordination ceremony, two members of the community laid the cloths on my shoulders as they read the names of those who sent the cloths,” Rose Mary said. “It was a moving adaptation of laying on hands.”

St. Clare’s identified the need for connection as a high priority for members during the pandemic, so they organized Community Chats on Zoom, initially twice a week. In recent weeks, chats have been reduced to one a week.

“Community members welcome the opportunity to hang out on the ‘church porch’ each week, sharing stories and simply checking in on one another,” she said.

“Nearly all adults in our community are now vaccinated, and we plan to begin meeting in person on June 13,” she said. “We welcome the opportunity to share in person again, as well as to give and receive hugs, but we hope to remain flexible and welcome the Spirit to move us creatively in the future.”

For information, email volbrecht@gonzaga.edu.

Pastor likens pandemic to a time of sabbath

Pastor likens COVID slow down and reflection to a time of sabbath

P: Steve Van Kuiken

The pandemic was like a sabbath.

It provided an opportunity for people in the congregation to slow down, reflect and think about their priorities in their lives and spiritual practices, said Steve van Kuiken, pastor Community Congregational United Church of Christ (UCC) in Pullman.

“In my congregation, some people really took advantage of that,” he said. “The level of their engagement is heightened and they are now more engaged than in the past.

“Their spiritual path has been heightened by the pandemic. In a general sense, it almost has served as a year-long sabbath,” he continued. “Some folks have been able to find a richness in that forced pause in their lives and opportunities to continue their spiritual search.”

COVID impacted everything—all the in-person things they would do, including hosting homeless families in Family Promise. Such in-person ministries had to stop.

Community Congregational UCC did Zoom worship, trying to stay connected with each other that way.

They added a food pantry outdoors at their church for people to come by and take whatever they want.

Many activities were on hold or are in a holding pattern now, but none of them were closed.

“Sometimes the church emphasizes the journey outward, and emphasizes engagement. The pandemic established and reconnected us with our roots, a good root system from a spiritual perspective,” said Steve.

“We are not human doings, but human beings. Spiritual activism that forgets to grow its roots is short lived,” he pointed out. “From my perspective as a pastor, the pandemic has offered the opportunity to focus on the journey inward.”

Steve estimates that a high percentage of the congregation are vaccinated—90 percent or more as of mid-May.

“We are pretty unanimous at this church that being vaccinated is an important thing to do, both for personal protection and for protection of the broader community,” he said. “We share with each other and our friends the importance of vaccinations informally, but have had no formal role in that.”

The church is moving to in-person worship in the summer.

They were able to meet in smaller groups according to restrictions, while still in Phase 2 in Whitman County.

“Some members are travelling now,” he said of the opening of restrictions.

Having a heightened awareness of food security issues, the congregation established an food pantry outside the front doors of the church.

The church was aware and involved with homelessness on the Palouse before the pandemic. That hasn’t changed that much, he said.

“There’s also a heightened awareness of public health and importance of the safety net in our local community and broader community,” Steve said.

For information, call 332-6411 or email steve@pullmanucc.org.

COVID changed ministries at Okanogan churches

COVID changed ministries at Conconully and Omak United Methodist Churches

P: Jack Schneider records sermons in his woodshop.

COVID changed the ministries of Jack Schneider, pastor at Conconully and Omak United Methodist Churches (UMC).

“Because of concerns about elderly in the congregations, we closed the churches starting March 16, 2020,” he said.

Jack began recording his sermons in his woodshop every week and for major holy days, uploading them to YouTube under the title, “Sermons from the Woodshop.”

He continues that outreach even after the churches opened. He has more than 60 sermons available to view there.

Jack had to stop his ministry to nursing homes, because of COVID restrictions, so he did visitations by phone instead.

With the Conconully UMC being the only church in town, he serves as chaplain for whole community, doing all funerals and weddings. Under COVID all funerals were gravesides, outside.

“As the only church in Conconully and the surrounding area, people travel 30 miles to come to the church, which was built in 1903, and in-person worship was dearly missed,” he said.

“We tried to do Maundy Thursday by zoom, but everyone prayed and sang at the same time. Everyone at different rates. It was chaos. For Easter Sunday, we did better. We had a pianist play and they sang but were all muted,” he said. “We did same thing for communal prayers. We did communion remotely, with bread and grape juice consecrated from a distance. We trusted in God’s grace to travel distances to bless.”

Conconully continued its food bank and outreach ministry.

“Our outreach is being present and being at people’s homes and volunteering in the food bank,” he said. “That changed.

Both churches started in-person worship about the third week of Lent, when people started to come back together. The Omak church is small, with 15 people coming on Sunday and spreading out well. Conconully took out half the pews to accommodate 30 to 35 attendees each week. Numbers vary with visitors coming from the state park and nearby resorts.

“Thankfully, every person in the Omak church is fully vaccinated and 94 percent were fully vaccinated at Conconully.

The Omak church closed to NA and AA groups in March 2020, as well.

When interviewed, Jack said the groups were considering reopening to 50 percent, but that is hard to do in an NA or AA group because people show up as they need to show up. They were considering splitting their meetings because the NA groups are large.

For information, call 429-3432 or email [jackfir56@outlook.com](mailto:jackfir@msn.com).