June 2021 COVID / Vaccination Stories for Web

Spirit knits body together while apart

Colbert pastor says Spirit knit members together while they were apart

P: Eric Peterson

As things open up and people regather, Eric Peterson, pastor of Colbert Presbyterian Church which he founded in 1997, said there was no long-term correction to his ecclesiology from COVID.

“The ideal way the Body of Christ manifests in its gathered form is an essential aspect of how the church functions, but the Spirit compensated by knitting the body together while we were apart,” he said.

Eric said the church navigated the changes by adapting to the online livestream format for worship.

They had youth, children, adult Bible studies, men’s and women’s mission projects and mission trips.

While many programs were curtailed or cancelled, they did some things they did not do before.

“The challenge was how to maintain connection to one another,” Eric said. “I felt the pandemic challenged our ecclesiology, the nature and purpose of the church with its emphasis on the embodied church being together in person.

“Part way through the pandemic we asked if we were any less the church than we were in closer proximity,” he said. “I don’t think so, because the pandemic required a more robust pneumatology—providing a way for the Holy Spirit to hold the body together across differences and distances.

For Eric, what was important was to reach out to vulnerable people in the community.

They administered grant-based food projects, purchasing bulk food to give to families school counselors identified as being food insecure.

While the school district handed out lunches after school, the church did it on weekends as a temporary stop-gap to take care of people with no financial margin.

To strengthen the benevolence fund, Eric said that “members turned over their stimulus checks and helped people who were not in the congregation come out unscathed by helping pay rent they could not cover.”

The church also gave some funds to other organizations, like Big Table and Family Promise.

In the fall, members hope to open the preschool co-op and keep the youth ministry going. The children’s ministry was mothballed because they couldn’t do it safely, he said.

They restarted back in-person worship on Easter, welcoming people to an outdoor worship with masks. As the curve has since flattened, those who are fully vaccinated have been able to gather without masks.

“We plan to livestream our service indefinitely,” Eric said.

The church is slowly gathering people back together.

The sewing group is reconvening.

The MOPS group will reconvene in June.

AA, Bible studies and children’s play dates are resuming.

His estimate was that 90 percent of the congregation were fully vaccinated compared to 50 to 60 percent in the community. He’s not aware of anti-vaxxers in the congregation, but knows there are some in the community.

“We consulted with medical professionals as we developed protocols and members had questions,” said Eric, who earned a bachelors in theology at Whitworth, a master of divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary and a doctorate of ministry from Portland Seminary at George Fox University.

For information, call 468- 9923 or email eric@colbertpres.org.

Being neighbors means being there for each other

Being neighbors in COVID means being there for each other

For Arianna Arends, pastor at Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Cheney and Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist (ELM) Campus Ministry, being neighbors during COVID means being there for each other, be it with vaccinations, mask wearing or food access.

“We act because we want to help each other out,” said Arianna, a fourth generation Spokanite and life-long Lutheran.

The congregation stopped worshipping in person in March 2020. It went to online and mailed worship services, which for the small aging congregation was challenging. Not everyone is adept with computers.

“We felt fragmented. We started phone groups. Each leader called five households to see how they were doing, and if they needed anything,” she said.

The council would call with announcements and communications.

They primarily used YouTube for sharing recorded worship services, but did some meetings, book studies and Sunday morning fellowship on Zoom. People liked the flexibility of watching worship on the YouTube video, Arianna said.

“We’ve reflected on how we’d like to go back to ‘the way things were.’ It’s hard for a leader to remind people we can’t do that, the world has changed,” she said. “We need to be other-focused, love our neighbors as ourselves. Harder for some is to think of other people first and to put ourselves into other’s shoes.”

They started back in person with an outdoor service on Palm Sunday. Then they went back into the building on Easter. Now they ask when they can sing and have communion.

Singing will happen, but under the governor’s guidelines, and they can cautiously do communion, in an unfamiliar way to be safe.

There were no deaths from COVID in the congregation. One person was hospitalized.

The quilting ministry, men’s group, group for Lutheran Community Services and Al Anon, which closed are slowly opening up as small groups.

“In the church probably at 75 percent, everyone at age to be vaccinated has at least one. I’m surprised, because vaccination became political, and I worried it would be more of an issue,” Arianna said.

One person volunteered to be part of a trial for a vaccine. Most everyone in the congregation does not understand why folks do not want to be vaccinated.

“I’m pleasantly surprised that everyone wants to be vaccinated. We haven’t done much education on it,” she said.

Council decided if people can show their vaccination card, they can sit next to a friend.

The congregation has been aware of particularly hunger in community.

“Even before I arrived three years ago, they opened up a free community pantry, where people could drop off or take food whenever they needed it, without proof of need or paperwork,” Arianna said.

In the pandemic, stories of people in need affected folks. They are almost overwhelmed by the level of donations the are receiving. The free pantry has grown, with volunteers filling it twice a day.

There was one call during pandemic from a community member looking for help with rent, so they asked the congregation to help them and some did. They usually refer people to Cheney Outreach.

ELM Campus Ministry went online in spring 2020 when Eastern Washington University no longer held in person classes. Students were challenged because professors had to teach in a virtual format. Professors overcompensated with more course work, assignments, tests and books to read. The students were overwhelmed, Arianna said.

There has been outreach to alumni, who need support as young adults do being the last hired and first to get laid off.

More students graduating this spring are not sure if they will have jobs, volunteer opportunities overseas or in the U.S. with vaccines or without vaccines.

“It is uncertain whether programs will start or what they will look like. It’s already uncertain for anyone in that time of their life, but now it is more uncertain,” she said.

Arianna has no sense of how many students are vaccinated on campus, but many who can be are. One had a roommate who came down with it.

“We formed a tight group in our campus ministry,” she said.

Even though they haven’t been able to be together in person, Arianna started Cross Connection boxes, sending themed boxes to EWU students for free, or offering the subscription box option to parents, grandparents and members of congregations buying boxes for young people in their lives.

The boxes a include book on the month’s theme, plus devotions and fun stuff like candy, pens, water bottles or reusable straws.

Each month, the campus ministry had a book study related to the campus ministry’s monthly theme: Faith and Voting, Racism, Creation Care from Indigenous Views and Gratefulness. They emailed the social work department, and 25 students signed up.

The campus ministry before March 2020 had weekly meeting Monday nights for a meal, conversation and community building.

“We also served as the clean-up crew at the monthly Feed Cheney free community meal and grocery pick up,” Arianna said. “ELM is looking forward to being in person again in the fall at EWU. I know the students are now even more hungry for community and certainly need a place to share joys, sorrows and questions with their peers.”

For information, on Emmanuel Lutheran, call 235-6300 or email [pastorarianna@gmail.com](mailto:pastorarianna@gmail.com); on ELM Campus Ministry, call 954-5886 or email elmateastern@gmail.com.

Newport Lutheran church made faith central

Newport Lutheran church made faith central to the way it responded to COVID

P: Newport church reconnects in outdoor communion

American Lutheran Church in Newport pared back and realized their response to COVID did not have to be about business and programs.

“It could reflect our heart—that focusing on God’s grace is what matters and the care we show one another and our community is what holds us together,” said Janine Goodrich, who has served since 2005 as pastor of the church with her husband, Matt.

During COVID, the congregation was not able to worship the same way they were used to. Most worship has been online. They had a small gathering for in-person worship, but were not able to sing or do coffee hour.

“With in-person worship a few people came and wanted to worship in the sanctuary,” Janine said. “They did mask protocols, but people missed the fellowship and social events.”

Throughout the year, they offered Wednesday evening services, as well as a Monday morning Bible Study online, and an online coffee hour after church.

“We set up calling trees to keep people connected and to remind them they belong to a community,” she said, “but we missed the opportunity to be together and give hugs,” said Janine.

They usually have a summer day camp, women’s circle and men’s group, and are looking to outdoor options for gathering those groups over the summer.

Last summer, they had worship and some other gatherings outside, this summer, they are doing the same. People bring lawn chairs and umbrellas when it’s hot. If it’s raining, they do inside.

They have continued offering Second Harvest Mobile Markets throughout the year. However, people no longer come inside, where they sit, visit and enjoy coffee and cookies while waiting, because the markets are now all drive-through because of COVID

“COVID changed the fellowship we had at those events. Now instead we stop and chat with people in their cars,” Janine said.

She estimates vaccination rates in the congregation are 50 to 75 percent, with probably 25 percent hold outs. The community rate is much lower,” she said.

“In the congregation, most are grateful to be able to be together again as vaccination rates rise, Janine said, “but some are still anxious about gatherings.”

The health district did drive-throughs at the rodeo grounds to vaccinate people. The church sent out information on email and encouraged members to go.

“We believe the vaccines are part of what will make it possible to be together again in familiar ways,” Janine said. “We are also grateful for the people who have come to us and found grace in our midst through our online presence as well. We know that will also continue to be a part of our life together in the future.”

For information, call 447-4338 or email alc.pastors@gmail.com.

COVID limited what members of Northwood Presbyterian in Spokane could do together, but the pastor Sue Keim notices that now they are slowly opening everything up more feel they can hug each other again.

“That’s good and okay for vaccinated people,” she said.

The congregation had to do studies and small groups online, and mailed or emailed announcements and newsletters instead of being together.

Attendance is down, but worship meetings resumed in person started Father’s Day in 2020.

They added more of a Facebook and video presence, which they had previously been meaning to do anyway, Sue said.

With a message and music every Sunday, choir on Facebook, worship music and other elements of the service have been emailed to everyone.

Many members are older so they still stay home, but are slowly returning.

They had small groups gather to work in the missions arena, such as with the food bank and continuing to do Meals on Wheels for seniors.

Sue said most people have been immunized, except children and teens.

“If we have to stay masked, we have to stay masked,” she said of protecting people.

Because their members are mostly over 60 years old, they haven’t sent volunteers to the food bank, which has had an age limit of volunteers being under 60.

Early on and again recently, Northwood, which supports Westminster Presbyterian’s food bank in West Central, received a lot of food for its folks and neighbors. Members were dropping off food once a week for those who needed milk, staples and canned food, she said.

“With our popular grief classes this spring, people are finding more relief and spiritual help from things like depression. This past year, we lost some pillars in our church. They died in the past year, but not of COVID. That has been hard, because we couldn’t do memorials,” said Sue, noting that they recently did one once again following the limits that have been set.

For information, call 328-2012 or email pastor@northwoodpres.org.

COVID provided a year-long sabbath

COVID affected all life at Pullman church, provided year-long sabbath

Community Congregational United Church of Christ gathered outside for Easter Sunrise Service. Photo courtesy of Steve Van Kuiken

COVID impacted everything at Community Congregational United Church of Christ in Pullman from all the in-person gatherings they had to hosting homeless families in their building for Family Promise.

All the in-person ministries had to stop, said Steve van Kuiken, the pastor

“The pandemic has provided “an opportunity for people to slow down and reflect and to think about what their priorities are in their life and spiritual practices are part of the priority, which some people have really take advantage of that,” he said.

“The level of their engagement is heightened and more engaged than in the past. The spiritual path has been heightened by the pandemic. In a general sense it almost has served as a year-long sabbath. Some folks have been able to really find a richness in that forced pause in their lives and opportunities to continue their spiritual search,” he said.

The church has been doing Zoom worship, trying to stay connected with one another that way.

They added a 24/7 free little food cupboard outdoors at their church for people to come by and take whatever they want.

“Sometimes the church emphasizes the journey outward and emphasizes engagement,” Steve said.

“The pandemic established and reconnected us with our roots, a good root system from a spiritual perspective,” he said. “It has helped us realize we are not human doings, but human beings.

“Spiritual activism that forgets to grow its roots is pretty short lived,” he continued. “From my perspective as a pastor, the pandemic has offered us the opportunity to focus on the journey inward.”

A high percentage of the congregation are vaccinated, he said, estimating that probably 90 percent are vaccinated.

“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. We share with each other and our friends the importance of vaccinations, informally, but have no formal role in that,” he said.

Community Congregational UCC will be moving to in-person worship sometime in the summer.

They were able to meet in smaller groups following restrictions. In Whitman County, they are still in Phase 2, which has freed things up so some members are travelling now.

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

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

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