

ALUMNI RESPONSES TO COVID-19

Church & Missions

- **Jeff Ebert (M.Div. '79)** Their congregation is divided into "flocks" of 10-15 families/singles and each flock has a trained deacon. The first thing they did was have the deacons check in with all their flock members and thereafter make a weekly phone or email connection, especially with older members.

Next they did a quick training for staff and small group leaders on how to use various video conferencing tools and purchased a larger license so they could have larger numbers in their video groups. They focused on helping their 40 plus small groups transition to online - that's their fellowship lifeline.

For worship they pulled videos of previous worship services to edit together for the first online Sunday. Sermons are normally taped anyway on Friday for their video services, so that wasn't an issue. Other pieces of the service had to be videoed and at first, they did that in the church. They've now transitioned to doing everything from their homes, and people actually seem to like that informality better.

Communication with the congregation is key so he sends a weekly email to the whole church family keeping them up to date on what they are doing. The children's ministry and student ministry both jumped right into providing resources for families, and video content and conferencing (for middle school and high school) and that's gone really well. Their elder board is also fully engaged in supporting the ministries.

Jeff is also doing a weekly online interview with a trusted resource for the congregation - a member who is an infectious disease specialist, a psychologist, the mayor of their town, etc.

For their staff they're doing weekly video meetings for the whole staff and smaller ones for various teams. To help keep the staff sharp in the social distancing Jeff asked all of them to sign up for some online class that would be of interest to them, not necessarily related to work, and the church would contribute \$100 toward the cost. They want them to build a scheduled growth time into their week and people chose a wide variety of interests. This was and is an important investment in keeping them healthy.

Now they're thinking about the steps for reopening the church and their ministries, asking "What have they learned about online ministry? What did they stop doing that they don't want to start up again? How is this a time to reconfigure a ministry approach or tactics? etc."

It is painful as some in their church family have seen family members die of the virus, including the mother of their associate pastor. They are encouraging their church family and their staff to reach out

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to their pastoral care pastor and to Jeff for counsel and prayer. So far, they're managing okay. Biggest concern is finances and the long-term impact to their budget and staffing if the social distancing continues into the fall and winter.

- **Adam Eisenga (M.Div. '07)** They have been pre-recording their worship services. They are streaming them on Facebook during their normal worship times (9:30 am and 6:00 pm). They are also available on YouTube for people to view whenever works in their schedule. They've done what they can to share the links to these worship services in the area. They have very involved elders and deacons who have been in touch with their districts. Adam has been working his way through the directory to catch up with everyone.

They have been hosting a Zoom Bible study meeting on Wednesday nights on the Psalms. The goal is to study God's word and give vent to their emotions. Their format is 1/3 study, 1/3 fellowship, 1/3 prayer, which has worked well for them. They held a Zoom prayer meeting for specific needs of farmers in their community. They sent their Sunday School and Catechism curriculums home for the parents' use. They have also included a link to a children and worship teaching every week.

They have different projects on hold in case they need the funds for benevolent needs. They had a freezer pantry for meat in place before this began but it has been a help to many in this time. Given that they are in Iowa, they were recently given the opportunity to open up as long as precautions are in place. They are working on that now. In order to keep church before people in a different way, Adam made the following hopefully humorous videos exploring aspects of church in the pandemic. View them: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLZn2FwjAR0wCPnrBeyfWtSfGw_3g_5jEL

- **Elizabeth Stone (M.Div. '15)** Stanford Presbyterian Church in Kentucky is a small-town church serving a farming community with members active in prayer and study, programs for all ages, and missions at home and abroad. When COVID-19 hit, the community rallied to cooperate across denominational lines to continue to feed the poor and homeless, giving out bags of groceries. They sent baskets to the nursing home as per usual. Worship went online for the first time on March 15th, and she has been broadcasting at least a sermon every week at the usual worship time using her personal computer on their Facebook page. www.facebook.com/stanfordpresbyterianchurch/ For her, that has included learning new technologies and equipment, improving and expanding the services, and their organist pitches in with live music. Their church had just gone live with a new website, and she linked the worship to their website www.stanfordpresbyterian.org and to her personal website, www.wvlivingstone.com The church website added a donation page, and people have been very generous and kept up with their offerings. Holy Week was a little tricky, and they had their first remote communion, for which she broadcast a "Communion Kit" so people could prepare and create sacred space. On Resurrection Sunday they broadcasted a traditional service. To be sure everyone was covered, she also wrote and sent out a newsletter via snail mail, since they have folks who are not online. Their denomination has provided valuable support for missions, technology, and information.

They use a telephone app (One Call Now) for personal prayer requests and church family updates.

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They use zoom for meetings and choir rehearsal and youth group. Elementary teachers organized an online scavenger hunt. Two people have gone home to be with the Lord, and they have had private socially distanced funerals, so their church organized a drive by sympathy parade for one family and provided a graveside service for the other (a homeless man). The local radio station has been broadcasting funerals so everyone in town can hear.

Because the elders, deacons, and other ministry leaders are engaged all the time, this transition has gone so smoothly. Any help she needed was readily provided. And seeing how many people were tuning into their sermon has inspired the elders to consider streaming live even after the quarantine is over.

Please pray that they all will persist in prayer, in faith, and in service, and that when this crisis is over there will be an increase in Kingdom work, and that lessons learned in isolation will enhance the church's ministry.

- **Steve Jaeger (M.Div. '08)** Like many churches, they've quickly adjusted to online worship services, including a "jumbotron" experience at the end. As closing music plays, their video producer spotlights different screens of their online worshipers for a couple seconds at a time. It's been one of the most unexpectedly life-giving portions of their services!

They've created a new "Family Room" on Facebook (a private group) for interactions (both humorous and serious), photo & video posts, and requests for help. It has generated far more social media engagement than any of their previous pages or groups. They've assembled a new, nimble "Congregational Care Team" that uses a Google spreadsheet "triage system" to identify and keep track of many kinds of needs within the church family. While Steve gives pastoral oversight to it, the work of caring for the body is being *done* by the body.

They're partnering with a local larger church that houses a food pantry to provide food packages to families in the local school district who are food-insecure as a result of school cancellation. They've taken advantage of Google's free access to Google Meet to all G-Suite user organizations to provide a free video call account to every small group leader. In their current sermon series, they're offering a suggested spiritual discipline to go along with each message, giving people tools to stay spiritual healthy during this time.

- **Timothy Bushfield (M.Div. '09)** Moving their Sunday services online was the easy part; reinforcing community and continuing to build identity has been more challenging... and more fun.

They wanted their church to feel connected, known, and special for Holy Week. Having already received 250 palm branches before the social distancing directives went into full effect, Timothy led a team of masked and gloved volunteers who snuck out before dawn on Palm Sunday to deliver palm branches to every home in their church directory, and then surprised them during their online worship welcome video that week by directing them to their front doors -- where they each found a palm branch, a Holy Week guide, and a box of 10 face masks. They wanted people to experience a

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feeling of belonging to their church, but more importantly, a sense of belonging to the people of God as Holy Week began.

Their other covert operation during Holy Week involved their worship team, of which Timothy is also a part. Anticipating that they might not be able to gather for Easter Sunday -- or even more specifically, for their Sunrise Service, they worked together a few weeks before Easter to record a favorite Easter worship song. They waited for the perfect morning that would provide a beautiful sunrise (still a couple of weeks before Easter) so they could record video on location to go along with the song they had recorded. The finished video began with the team in the sanctuary, worshipping with the song "Man of Sorrows." In the video, the team then packed up all the gear, drove down to the back shore in Gloucester, and set up just in time for a beautiful sunrise at the fourth verse: "See the stone is rolled away..." The finished video can be viewed here: <https://youtu.be/ZPSVYi5B8go>

While their church couldn't gather on Easter for their Sunrise service, they heard again and again how meaningful (and what a surprise!) that video was: THEIR worship team, leading THEIR community in worship, down at THEIR place on the back shore, for THEIR sunrise service. This wasn't a link to something cool on the internet -- it was their very own people creating a unique expression of worship in the midst of social distancing. If they couldn't gather for the sunrise, they figured, they could bring the sunrise to their church. They kept the project a secret until they posted it as their call to worship for their online worship service on Easter Sunday morning.

They continue to look for creative ways -- not just to provide content, support, and opportunities for worship, but to reinforce their identity as a church and to actively build community even from a distance in ways that inspire people to consider the beauty and grace of Jesus, drawing them into worship!

- **Raymond Richards (M.Div. '90, D.Min. '08)** and his church moved all services and meetings online. Also, they have divided their congregation up into groups of 10-12 families and assigned each group to a leader for support and prayer. Families are called or communicated with on a weekly basis to provide continuity of care. With benevolence funds, they make sure that their congregation is taken care when they can't work or meet basic needs. Outside the church, they helped spearhead an initiative which brings together food pantries, churches, governmental leaders, and the Office of the Aging to target the most vulnerable in their county to make sure they have necessary food and medicines during the pandemic without having to leave their homes.
- **Hilary Livingston (M.Div. '01)** and her church moved all services and meetings online. Since Easter Sunday, they've had the same rhythm. She hosts a Zoom fellowship hour at 10:00 AM Sunday mornings, followed by their virtual worship service posting to their church Facebook page at 11:00 AM. Then, at around 11:45 AM, she does a Facebook live segment to pass the peace of Christ, share & pray for prayer concerns, and say "hello" to everyone. She thinks they'll keep this pattern until they're back in person, whenever that will be. She added some creative segments to their prerecorded services, like reading the Easter gospel reading from John 20 from their cemetery. Their

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denomination is even allowing them to observe virtual communion. She's also hosted a weekly hygge group via Zoom (hygge - pronounced "HUE-gah" it is the Danish concept of coziness). They're exploring ways to offer Bible studies and other educational opportunities virtually during this time.

- **Missy Altman (MACC '15)** She and her husband are on staff with Crossroads Christian Church in Evansville, Indiana. Crossroads and a number of other churches in their area (from different denominations) have joined with a couple of local ministries that are already focused on community outreach and meeting felt needs. One of the organizations, CommunityOne (community1.org), transitioned their website to become a place for connecting people with COVID19-related needs with volunteers who can meet those needs. This website is needaneighbor.org. The participating churches each have a person responsible for vetting volunteers and walking them through the process of choosing a need and meeting it. Various needs include a friendly phone call, prayer, providing groceries and other essential supplies, and financial assistance. As of today, almost 400 needs have been met, another 50 are in process. There is a team responsible for helping those with more serious financial needs.

Crossroads set aside a sum to help meet the needs and encouraged staff members to participate as able. Through needaneighbor.org, Missy and her husband Bill have made a new friend not far from their home, and they will keep in touch with her. Crossroads staff and volunteers are also making individual calls to connect with senior citizens, members and visitors, to check in and see if they have needs the church could help with, inform them of resources available during this time, and pray with them if appropriate.

She is a counselor, and they are using videoconferencing and phone calling to maintain connections with clients. Having fewer clients during this time has freed her up to help with other needs, pursue additional training, and connect with family, friends, and neighbors.

- **Brandon Reagor (MACT '15)** This season of ministry has certainly been unique and challenging. There have been a number of needs that have arisen and the social distancing guidelines in place in their state have made it difficult to respond to these needs. However, they have been able to work alongside other churches in their area to continue to be a faithful presence of Christ's love in this time.

As far as continuing a ministry of the Word, their church has set up a YouTube livestream for Sunday mornings. They are making use of the comments section on that to have some interaction amongst the congregation during the live stream. They also host a Q&A with the pastors during the week via Zoom. This gives them some (digital) face to face time with the congregation.

While their community has not seen a major outbreak like others, there are many in their town who are facing an economic crisis because of lost jobs and difficulty getting essential items. They have partnered with a number of other churches and the ministerial association in their county to put together a resource for meeting this need. This includes a website that people can go to in order to

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request help or volunteer to give help. You can check that out at <https://coronahelplivingston.com>.

Finally, Brandon serve as a chaplain at their local hospital, and he has seen first-hand how hard their healthcare workers are working to protect their community and prevent a major outbreak. My church and others in the area have put together care packages for their healthcare workers that include snacks, gifts, thank-you cards, etc. They've packaged and delivered these according to Infection Control guidelines from the hospital. They hope that, in addition to their regular prayers for their hospital staff, this is a simple way they can show their appreciation and support for all that they are doing.

- **Steve McLean (M.Div. '86)** and his church, especially the mens' group, is making use of zoom meetings. They are finding that there are some people who are available to meet this way who couldn't meet in person and are considering how to continue to use this technology once they are able to meet in person again.
- **Manny Anchondo (MATH '13)** and his church have been streaming both youth and children's services via an online platform where kids can interact. They are also sending cards to families, visiting students with lunch in their lawn and finding new ways to minister under social distancing.
- **Ken Wilson (MATS, '84)** has helped launch a new men's small group via Zoom for spiritual seekers. They are spending six Wednesday evenings investigating the key elements of the gospel message, and three men are encountering the claims of Christ for the first time. They seem to be ripe and receptive for new life in Christ.
- **Paul Rollins (MATH '79)** and his church have moved their services online. They recently did a virtual communion service, where each congregant provided their own juice and bread.
- **Daniel Moore (M.Div. & Th.M. '00)** and his church have online worship services featuring their members. They have a focus on shepherding, with volunteers calling every member/regular attender for a weekly to check in. Daily prayer phone meetings are offered, as well as daily evening devotions. The church is also making and distributing masks. The church also offers grocery, pharmacy and hot meal delivery to elderly.
- **Allen Kemp (M.Div. '83, D.Min. '97)** and his wife, Deborah Miller Kemp (M.Div 1984) began pastoring Jamestown Presbyterian Church in Virginia in March while the regular pastor went on sabbatical. They have transitioned the congregation to online services and some home bound members said they were overjoyed because they now feel connected like they haven't been able to in years. Their challenge is to keep this congregation connected with one another as they give them hope, speak God's Word to them faithfully as they preach, pray, email, and call them on the phone. And, to offer comfort in their fear, loneliness, and worry.
- **Steven Simpson (M.Div. '90)** and his church have moved all services online. He has also been recording and posting videos of songs he's performed. To keep his congregation engaged, he is also

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posting daily "QuaranVlogs" for his congregation. He shoots them from various locations inside and outside of the church facilities, sharing stories about the meaning of the stained-glass windows, history of their church bell, and little side stories about the people and history of the church. They last 5 to 12 minutes and usually include a mail call, a focus of the day, a prayer, announcements, Scripture, and a song.

- **Mary Reitano (MACC '12)** organized an online Zoom meeting Bible Study with women at the church soon after the shut-down started. She wrote the first five studies on topics relevant to dealing with coronavirus stress--staying calm and connected, exercising patience and wisdom. They will discuss a book on the Psalms next--*Open and Unafraid* by W. David O. Taylors. Also, they are doing a short monthly email and/or text newsletter to take the place of their Women of the Church ministry monthly luncheons. Their mostly elderly community will likely be conservative on resuming group activities for several months more. She also wrote in her bi-monthly mental health column for the local paper that "We Are All in This Together" and encouraged the community to stay calm, creative and connected.
- **J. Anthony Lloyd (M.Div. '82)** in addition to online services and Bible studies, some of their church members have been volunteering at the local pantry. Also, deacon care groups have prayer lines throughout the week. Counseling and prayer services are offered online throughout the week. They have an intake ministry which is supporting families in emergency, food insecurity and utilities crisis. Additionally, they have weekly conference calls with state, local elected leaders and clergy groups and city-wide prayer and reflection time online for Framingham, Massachusetts.
- **Sheree Harrington (M.Div. '05)** is in private practice and part of the pastoral team at her church where she serves as the Pastor of Women's leadership. She ministers to her clients via Telehealth which allows her to keep working. In addition to online services and Bible studies, she also meets with 5 women in the church through an app as part of a leadership group.
- **Ramatu Kallon (MAUM '08)** and his church are utilizing social media to minister to their congregation, including prayer ministry three times a day.
- **Virginia (Ginger) Asel (D.Min. '01)** has been sharing a reflective devotional with adults on FB live and with children daily via Zoom. Her church continues to conduct Children's Church at 9 a.m. every Sunday via Zoom.
- **Hal Thorton (MRE '80, M.Div. '82)** and his wife are making face masks for the hospital and an assisted living facility. They are also using Zoom for their weekly small group Bible study. He is mentoring a member of their church.
- **Stephen Samuel (M.Div. '95)** and his church have moved all services and meetings online.
- **Gordon Horsman (MRE '68)** and his church send notes to members of the church who do not have email and involves different members in the online services. All congregants are also called each

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week by a member of the staff or leadership team.

- **Paul Hoffman (M.Div. '03)** and church have moved all services and meetings online. He also records and posts a 5-minute devotional on Mondays following the Sunday service.
- **Ted Brandt (M.Div. '88)** and his church have held “drive-in” services for their congregation, as well as weekly phone calls by deacons to families, socially distant pastoral visits, daily worship emails, and other online meetings and Bible studies. You can read more by visiting <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/california-church-blends-old-and-new-technology-to-provide-worship-during-pandemic/>
- **Jose Antonio Carrion-Aquino (D.Min. '20)** and his church are recording a weekly devotional, zooming an hour of prayer time, and also recording their worship services to stream online.
- **Howard DeVries (M.Div. '86)** and his wife, Marlene, run Celebrate Recovery, Divorce Care and Grief Share programs. They are presently meeting on Zoom. The greatest blessing during this time has been live CR testimonies from people via Zoom. Going live with Celebrate Recovery testimonies from others in the country has made a huge difference for attendees.
- **Roland & DeAnne Sula (MACL, MACC '19)** continue to pastor and counsel at a distance during this time. Their church is involved in practical ministries of food delivery and helping families financially who are unexpectedly unemployed during COVID. Online prayer meetings as well as small groups continue for the church body here Tirana.
- **Edgars Mazis (M.Div. '93)** pastors Agenskalns Baptist Church in Marupe. They are streaming their services as well as meeting online for studies via Zoom. They are sending Bible study materials and sermon notes to their seniors and try to help those who face financial difficulties.

To view additional responses, please visit gordonconwell.edu/alumni/covid-19-responses.