

Shalom!

A JOURNAL FOR THE PRACTICE OF RECONCILIATION

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Stories and Lessons from the Pandemic

NOT LONG AFTER COVID-19 shut down our congregation in March 2020, my pastor asked if I would be willing to transcribe the sermons for folks who did not have access to the internet. I agreed, thinking that this was something I could do at home to help others. I did not have any technical transcription tools, so I would sit at the computer listening to the audio file of the sermon and type furiously, stopping frequently to catch up or “rewinding” the audio to catch something I missed or make sure I got it right. Eventually, I found online transcription software that helped, but required significant editing. (I should have kept a list of all the bloopers I found, as the software seemed to make up stuff if it didn’t understand my pastor’s southern accent!) After editing, I would send the manuscript to the church office which would then print and mail the sermons. Little did I know that I would be transcribing sermons until September 2021. And who could have guessed that we would still be dealing with the pandemic after two years?

My husband and I have been fortunate. Our retirement income has not been affected, we have not been sick, and we were more than willing to be vaccinated and boosted and wear masks to protect ourselves and others. Our lives have been minimally disrupted, unlike thousands of others who have lost loved ones to COVID-19, home-schooled kids while still trying to work, lost jobs and/or homes, struggled financially, or who have been very sick and continue to suffer from “long COVID.”

Through Zoom, during the locked-down days of the pandemic, we have been able to continue with social activities. We even held a New Year’s Eve party by Zoom in 2020. I came to appreciate and look forward to my Sunday school class each week. Zoom turned out to be an introvert’s boon; I found the virtual class easier to participate in than in-person. For more than a year, this weekly online learning community provided a time of significant fellowship that encouraged and challenged me in my faith. We’re back in-person now, but continuing some of the new practices from our online time.

This edition of *Shalom!* reflects on how the pandemic has affected the church, the lessons learned, challenges faced, and new methods developed to meet a crisis for which most of us weren’t really prepared. What lessons has God taught you and your church?

A couple editorial notes:

- Watch for the 2022 subscription renewal, coming your way soon. Thanks in advance for responding promptly
- Topics under consideration for 2022 include teaching peace, engaging in difficult conversations, foundations for active peacemaking, and intersecting with Brethren in Christ U.S.’s Project 250.

Correction: In the Fall 2021 edition, the author’s name on page 12 was misspelled. It should be Levison Soko. My apologies.

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

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Reaffirming Shared Identity Through Enacted Narratives

By Matthew R. Peterson

AN INTRIGUING TREND observed during the COVID-19 pandemic has been that despite significant social upheaval, many people report that their faith has grown. In a recent Pew Research Center survey, 28 percent of American respondents stated that their faith has strengthened in response to the pandemic. But an increase in faith does not necessarily mean that one's faith has been shaped by a shared theological heritage.

In fact, what "faith" and "religion" refer to varies wildly throughout Western societies. For example, in a November 2021 U.S.-based survey by PRRI, 52 percent of "anti-vax" respondents claimed that receiving the COVID-19 vaccine would be a vio-

lation of their religious beliefs, while only 33 percent stated that their religious tradition prohibits vaccination. Such a discrepancy suggests that "religion" may frequently be viewed through an individualistic lens, rather than through rootedness in a wider faith community, its teachings, and its story.

Churches, particularly within the United States, must face the challenges presented by "religion" decoupled from shared stories and religious individuals whose identities are increasingly shaped by polarized politics, media narratives, and social media echo chambers. Two years of pandemic isolation has hastened the shift from religion as participation to religion as consumption. And when religion is construed as a consumer good, it is no wonder that there has been an increase in religious identities formed by individualistic narratives and worldly concerns rather than following Christ in community.

Narrative and identity

What can be done to help churches recover from loss of community identity during the COVID-19 era? Some guidance can be found from the works of theologian N. T. Wright. In his 1992 book *The New Testament and the People of God*, Wright observes:

Human life [is] grounded in and constituted by the implicit or explicit stories which humans tell themselves and one another. . . . [W]orldviews, the grid through which humans perceive reality, emerge into explicit consciousness in terms of human beliefs and aims, which function as in principle debatable expressions of the worldviews. The stories which characterize the worldview itself are thus located, on the map of human knowing, at a more fundamental level than explicitly formulated beliefs, including theological beliefs.

If storytelling exists at such a core level of our self-conception, then recapturing a shared sense of corporate identity will require a reorientation towards our shared narrative(s) as a people of faith before trying to address individualistic beliefs and postures

adopted during the pandemic. Locating our personal lives within the story of Christ's saving work is indeed important. But as we emerge from an era of isolation, we need to recapture how communities of faith participate in the grand narrative of salvation, and why communal life cannot be replaced by private belief.

Enacted narratives in earliest churches

At this juncture, it would be helpful to look to the Christian communities of the New Testament, who were in the process of becoming a people. The earliest churches appear to have maintained their collective identities through shared practices that reaffirmed the theological narratives upon which they were founded. In baptism, believers were declared buried to the world and raised to new life with Christ, a story that became the basis for shared identity and served as a bond of unity between members (Rom. 6:2-5; Eph. 4:3-6). The celebration of the Lord's Supper became a way to "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" and to participate in unity as a community linked to the breaking of his body and the shedding of his blood (1 Cor. 10:16, 11:23-26).

Enacted Brethren in Christ narratives

We might also look to our shared traditions in the Brethren in Christ. The close link between baptism and membership in the Brethren in Christ conveys the story that the life of faith is one of belonging in devotion to other followers of Jesus. Likewise, child dedications reaffirm our commitment to God's gift of life and the spiritual formation of all members. The practice of feet washing is a shared act of telling our story as communities of mutual submission that elevate servanthood over personal ambition (John 13:12-17). Marriage celebrations rehearse the union between Christ and his people in servant love towards one another (Eph. 5:21-33). Love feasts, potluck dinners, and other gatherings reinforce the necessity of community for the interpretation of scripture, spiritual growth, and peaceful reconciliation.



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Enacted narratives at Plowshares Brethren in Christ

One of the core practices in our congregation (Plowshares Brethren in Christ, located in the Lexington, Kentucky area) has been the regular sharing of meals and the Lord's Supper in our home groups. These acts at the dinner table transform us from observers to participants, and our gathering together makes a community out of individuals. Through shared meals, adults and children alike join Christ's grand narrative of making all things new by becoming a people. Gathered in his name, commemorating his life, death, and resurrection through shared bread and cup, we are reminded of our place together in God's story and the unique heritage of the Brethren in Christ.

Through such story-telling actions we learn and re-learn that faith is lived out in community rather than on the screen or on social media.

Living our story together

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have all embraced different stories about ourselves and about others. Often, these narratives prompt division along lines set by wider social discourse. Recapturing a shared identity and maintaining unity in the faith will be difficult. But "enacted narratives" that turn us away from consumerist views of faith and towards participation in community will be key. Such actions, far from being rote performances or denominational requirements, form the rhythm of our life in community. Through these cultural

symbols, we reaffirm and reenact our shared story as the Brethren in Christ, a people rather than persons. In the context of shared stories, we can begin to address community fractures brought about during this pandemic.

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The Twenty-First Century Church: Is Smaller Better?

By Lois Saylor

NOT LONG AGO, I posted a question on Facebook asking, "What if God is calling you to small?" It was born out of my resistance—rebellion even—to our cultural ideas of success. Even the church seems to reverence large over small, and ministries that create buzz over ministries done without fanfare. Church evaluation metrics can favor numerical growth and ask little about spiritual growth. Favor is lavished on people who make a name for themselves, indicating a celebrity mindset. Remember the "widow's mite"? Jesus noticed the widow. Would we? Would we label her a success? And if so, would it just be a "Christian" label, while we turn our attention to the big donors, the ones who can help with our budget crunch?

The pandemic has highlighted questions for me in how we "do church." It is a conversation I'm still having with myself. I have questions; the answers, however, are less certain and must be multifaceted. One size does not fit all.

Part of my questioning concerns big budgets with building and maintenance and staffing costs. If we need buildings, is renting better so less time and energy is spent on mortgages and maintenance? Would relocating be harder or easier? Would renting change our focus to daughtering new

churches instead of growing one larger church, and would that spread us out geographically creating more "cities on a hill" to be seen by more people? Regarding staffing, I think multiple staffing, pastoral and otherwise, can unintentionally foster church as spectator sport. Pastors, however, are called to equip the saints to minister and not to replace them. Recently I've heard of a new concept called co-vocational pastoring instead of bi-vocational. Co-vocational pastors work part-time in ministry while holding another job that they also have the passion, skill, education, or talent to do. The second job is not simply supplemental, but purposeful to exercise other giftings as a fulfilling way of vocation. Is this a forward-looking model?

Thinking about budgets makes me question the very basic idea of churches even organizing themselves around budgets and giving. Why? What might be better? And as an organization, are big churches more susceptible to institutional creep, that unseen force in all organizations that starts to make the institution more important than people, even the people it was created to serve? Institutional creep can be subtle and insidious. We may not realize how we are working to maintain an institution even as ministry is labeled the priority. Would small help against

institutional creep and keep the focus, time, and energies on a biblical calling of the church as the body of Christ?

I am also questioning the abundance of church programs. Are all our church programs necessary or even the best way to minister? What if partnering with para-church groups and other churches became central or primary in organizing service? Can we encourage people to serve outside the church ministering with organizations of their choice and directly to the people in their lives—next door neighbors, co-workers, friends, and friends of friends? Does ministry have to be on the organizational flow chart or have a budget line-item? The easy answer is yes. But should we rethink?

Of course, even small churches would need to be intentional. Small alone is not an answer, but it might be helpful. At the very least, small should be seen as a viable and needed option and not as an "unsuccessful" church. The idea is to rethink church: what is important? What does the Bible call for? What does the kingdom of God look like as believers congregate together in this time and place? There are some church models already in practice that reflect some of my questioning such as house churches or congregations that focus on small groups as cen-

tral to Christian life as discipleship. We have done megachurches; is it time for micro-churches?

Over the past months, I've read articles and listened to podcasts that describe micro-churches as one model that addresses some of my questions. While there is no one model for all micro-churches, they have some commonalities. First, they have a streamlined structure that is egalitarian and flat rather than hierarchical. There is just enough structure to function, but no more. Second, they work out of the principle that believers are a nation of priests and often have no paid clergy. They minister to one another, teach each other, and help each other. Third, micro-churches can meet regularly or weekly with varying worship or teaching styles. For some, prayer is the focus of the gathered meeting. A traditional Sunday service is not necessarily emphasized, but they

could have traditional service experiences within their own circumstances. Fourth, the micro-churches have a vision to serve with a focus that is outwardly not inwardly purposed. Often the weekly gathering will be a time of preparing people to go out and serve the community. Sometimes this means they will have one very particular ministry-service focus. Fifth, micro-churches grow by helping others to start micro-churches and not by growing their own numbers. The simple structure makes it easy to grow, change, and reproduce.

I am just writing out loud. I don't know if I'm hitting the mark or just nibbling around the edges. I don't pretend to understand all the current societal swift waters we are in, let alone have the foresight to understand what is coming our way. But I am wondering if smaller is better so that we can focus on loving and helping one another on a more

intimate and accountable scale. And I'm wondering if the real church, the kingdom of heaven, would grow in depth and breadth with smaller gatherings of connected believers. As I listen to the church at large, I know I am not the only one with these questions.

Is God calling you to small? Maybe. Maybe not. But he is calling. May we hear, follow, and rejoice in all the ways he works in the world.

Lois Saylor is an editorial advisor for Shalom! and attends the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church. Lois also recommends this recent book which is asking some of the same questions: A Church Dismantled: A Kingdom Restored, by Conrad L. Kanagy (Masthof, 2022).

Is Online Engagement a Worthwhile Investment?

By James Dinger

I AM HONORED to contribute to this edition of *Shalom!* I am a pastor, navigating these uncharted waters along with everyone else in the pursuit of Jesus's call to "go and make." I'm not a technology consultant with a takemydollar.com website waiting for you at the end of this article. Also, what I'm sharing has been successful only due to God's favor and an incredible leadership team and staff who have been willing to take some risks with me.

I have three critical pieces of advice that I've found will assist in successfully beginning to close the backdoor COVID has blown right open—and they aren't related to technology.

The first requires an attitude change. We may not have had a choice in the hand COVID dealt us, but we all have a choice in how we play the cards. This is important. I have spoken with a lot of pastors who use COVID as a perpetual excuse and have allowed the pandemic to define their ministries. I have challenged our teams not to allow this mindset to take root, and together, we have refused to allow COVID to define us. Rather, we have chosen to rely on the Holy Spirit's guidance to seek creative op-

portunities during the pandemic.

The second piece of advice comes in the form of a question and quite frankly could challenge or reveal some areas of traditionalism. We have all heard it said that the message of the Gospel never changes, but the methods by which we deliver it do. Let's face it: just like it was radio in the 1920s, television in the 1950s, and DVDs in the 1990s, in 2022 the average person in America clicks online more quickly than any other source of media. Social media, apps, and streaming channels are the engagement options our culture has chosen to embrace. Pastors, are we relying on outdated methods of communicating our message?

Third, we must look at our investment in online engagement investment as a missional activity. If all we are going to do is reluctantly throw money at technology in order to compete with a culture that is wooing our sheep away and rendering our discipleship efforts ineffective, then I believe we are setting ourselves up for frustration. But, if we think of our technology investment and implementation as a missional opportunity to engage hearts for Jesus Christ, then the "passion" and "giftings" that we normally see in effec-

tive start-up ministries will create momentum and generate excitement.

Before Pathway Community Church made the investment, our elders, executive team, pastors, and staff prayed and processed the missional components together. We refused to "take it on the chin" with COVID and committed to proactively advance the mission of Jesus Christ with the tools today's technology affords us.

I can almost hear some saying, "All this sounds so heavy and time-consuming; is it truly worth it?" The answer came to me rather clearly when a mother and father in our congregation excitedly talked to me about their adult children. They told me that their adult child and his wife had been away from the Lord for a long time, but had been watching our services online. Get this: as they were watching and listening to the messages, they sensed the Holy Spirit speaking to them and they decided to give their lives to Jesus right in their living rooms. I had not met them, but they had already met Jesus through this technology. Guess who showed up in person at our next service? This was a clear indication that integrated online technology can effectively "hand-shake" with our

in-person outreach ministries. I have numerous stories of people who have engaged with our church online before checking us out in person.

So we can reach them online; can we disciple them online? Ideally, I want to be with people face-to-face. Unfortunately, many people don't give us this opportunity. If they aren't in the church, they aren't there. We're competing against a lot: football, cheerleading, dance, work, rain, snow, sickness, wintertime blues.

For every growth group we offer, we now offer a Zoom option alongside our in-person teaching. It can be as simple as setting up a quality webcam, laptop, and speaker. With a little effort, the group leader can personalize the experience. We actively engage and welcome those who have joined us online. We do not shame them for not coming in person. We engage them, in real time, with the group discussion, including times of prayer.

The result is that we have seen a higher percentage of people (about a 50 percent increase) sticking with the classes, both in-person and online. If they can't make it, they have not missed the material and momentum of the class. So far, we have done topical book studies, hermeneutics, and even times

of prayer.

One of the other things we are currently finding highly effective during the broadcast of our main service is having a volunteer "online pastor" whose heart beats with wisdom, compassion, and prayer. While we are broadcasting online, we have that person engage the viewers through the chat: "How can we pray for you today?" "Did you catch that point Pastor Jim just made?" "Hallelujah!" On average, we have 20-50 personal touch points during the service.

We also archive sermons and messages on our website, and YouTube. Like everyone else, we have taken a hit with attendance and are currently at 60-70 percent of our congregation attending in-person. But because we have gone online and archived our sermons, by the time Sunday evening rolls around, our stats indicate that anywhere from 180-300 people have logged in and watched some portion of the message that day. By Tuesday, our stats regularly hit the 500+ mark from all over the globe.

This begs the question: Are these all real people and not just internet phishing trolls? I don't know, but when someone from Africa is asking me specifics about a message, or someone from Utah comments, or a family

I've never met before from 10 miles down the road decides to show up one day and tell me they've been following us for weeks and are ready to make this their church—there has to be some merit to this new vehicle for presenting the Gospel.

Is the investment worth it? We are seeing real people on the other end of these online efforts—people who are growing and coming to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Isn't that what it's all about? Whether they're listening while working out at the gym, or streaming us in their car while doing grocery runs or picking up the kids at school, that's okay. We adapt and advance with the call of Jesus to "go and make" even if it means going online.

James (Jim) Dinger is the senior pastor of Pathway Community Church (BIC), York, PA. He has more than two decades of experience in marketing and business development and pursued a seminary education after receiving a call from God to ministry almost 17 years ago.

A Pandemic Project: MCC's Winter Warmup

By Geoff Isley

MY WIFE DAWN and I started knotting comforters in the fall of 2019 in our church's fellowship hall. Our initial idea was to use the time after our community meal to spread the word about MCC's upcoming one hundredth anniversary. We brought a comforter along every Wednesday night, set up a large table, and invited people to sit with us and tie the knots. We completed one comforter every Wednesday night with time to spare, so I started bringing two comforters each week. Word spread, and within a few months we had 15-20 like-minded folks involved.

Our goal was to take the finished comforters to a joint event with Harrisburg Brethren in Christ as part of a Great Winter Warmup event in February 2020. We met in Harrisburg to work on comforters together

and completed about a dozen comforters that day, in addition to the 14 we brought from Grantham.

Some folks were interested in sewing, so they offered to bring tops. Others thought they couldn't sew anymore, but were happy to donate fabric, and others liked to cut the scraps into squares for us. As the world began to close down in 2020 from the pandemic, we realized that since we were not going to be able to gather in groups to work on the comforters, we needed to decentralize. Working separately, but in concert, we thought we could continue creating comforters for MCC.

We had one event at our home in March 2020, with about 15 people gathering to complete five comforters together. Men, women, and children were excited to partic-

ipate. That Saturday evening turned out to be just days before the pandemic restrictions locked everyone at home for months. We had no idea how precious that community time would feel in retrospect. It would be a very long time until we could gather safely as a group.

The scattered: cutters, piecers, and knotters

We knew there must be other people who were eager for this kind of project while they were locked down, and tried to make it as easy as possible for them to continue making comforters. I put out frequent posts on social media keeping people updated on what was needed. I also posted several appeals for donations of fabric suitable for cutting into squares and making tops. The response was heartwarming and for the most part, people

were very willing to drive and drop them off on my front porch, so there wasn't even much face-to-face contact.

Some folks came to my front porch and took a pile home to cut squares. They returned the cut squares in big stacks to my porch, and I would divide them into piles of 140 squares, trying to combine attractive colors, and then put them in a plastic bag back out on the porch. Another group came to my porch and took a pack or two. They would take them home and piece the squares into comforter tops: 10 rows wide, and 14 rows long. Then the completed tops would show up on my porch. I pinned the backing and tops together, sewed a binding around the edges, and sent them back out for the knotters. When the comforters were knotted, they'd return to the porch. When I had a dozen finished converters, I'd drop them off at Pam Silverman's house to take to the MCC Material Resources Center (MRC) in Ephrata.

Gratefully gathered

As 2021 came and the pandemic continued, we continued to work. By early summer, when restrictions were finally lifted, we reached the milestone of one hundred comforters. My wife and I invited all the volunteers to our back yard for a picnic to celebrate

and thank people, and it was truly a precious time of togetherness after being separated for over a year. We also invited Pam Silverman, a relative newcomer to Grantham Church, and the quilt room supervisor at the MRC, to share an update with the group of about 25 people. It was great to hear how much the comforters are appreciated. Comforters are shipped all over the world to provide compassion and relief to people who have fled their homes due to war or natural disasters. Several people shared stories of feeling connected through this project while there was so much uncertainty and anxiety in the world around them. We heard how the pandemic had severely impacted MCC's anniversary year. All their plans for special fundraising events were impaired, so it seemed all the more appropriate to continue to help MCC by making as many comforters as we could.

Since the start of the project we have now delivered more than 260 comforters. The MRC receives comforters from all over Central Pennsylvania all year long. Pam shared that when she has a dozen of our comforters to bring in, everyone comes to see them. They think ours are really attractive!

Each one is opened and inspected before it is put into a machine that presses all the air

out and shrink wraps it so that it's in the most efficient shape and size to stack on a pallet. The pallets are also shrink-wrapped and loaded in a shipping container. When request for comforters come to MCC, they fill the requests by shipping the containers. Comforters continue to be the most requested item from relief agencies worldwide.

Spreading the joy

One of the best parts of sitting at the center of this pandemic web of activity was seeing how the energy and enthusiasm for MCC and comforter-making spread. When I posted pictures of the completed comforters, comments and interest poured in from friends near and far. A few folks from out of state even started sewing and sending their comforter tops to us to complete. Friends sent piles of fabric to cut into squares, or to serve as the backing. Others sent donations to buy supplies like sheets for backs and the batting that goes in the middle. One family even took comforters along on their summer vacation and sent pictures of them working together with neighbors in the campground at their picnic table.

Geoff Isley is an artist and graphic designer. He and his wife attend the Grantham Brethren in Christ Church, Mechanicsburg, PA, where he leads a visual arts team and serves on the Worship Commission.

A Supervised Classroom During COVID

by David Kent

THREE WEEKS PRIOR to the scheduled start date for the 2020-2021 school year, all the local school districts announced that there would be no in-person learning for the immediate future. All instruction would be done virtually. Parents were scrambling to find appropriate supervision to facilitate online learning for their children. Many parents were at a loss on such short notice that quitting employment seemed to be the only viable option.

The West Side Brethren in Christ Church, located in Chambersburg, Franklin County, Pennsylvania, decided to explore the development of a supervised classroom to help families in our congregation navigate this difficult situation. The church board es-

tablished an ad hoc committee consisting of the pastor, one certified teacher, one board member and one parent of a school-age student to study the problem, collect data, formulate a proposal, detail a budget and submit the plan to the board.

Many policies and procedures were developed. The entire process which began July 30 was completed by the start date of school on August 24. West Side interviewed and hired a full-time supervisor and an assistant. Not only did the classroom provide supervision during school hours but opened at 7 a.m. and closed at 5 p.m. to accommodate parent work schedules. Volunteers from the congregation chaperoned the students during the daycare portion of the schedule.

We charged a very modest fee of \$10 a day per child. Since this amount only accounted for 50 percent of the school budget, the church board agreed to sponsor the remaining 50 percent through donations and special offerings. The extra donations and offerings were necessary because we hadn't included this expense in the church budget for 2020.

Church families were given priority for enrollment. Community families were then given opportunity as space allowed. Maximum enrollment was capped at 10 students although we did expand to 12. Three separate school districts were represented. Students spanned grades 1-5. We had a waiting list of 17 students. The enrollment was fluid

as school situations changed frequently throughout the year, but the classroom was always maxed out.

Each student needed to bring their own computer (usually furnished by the school district), meals, snacks, and a water bottle. COVID guidelines were established and enforced. Masks were worn during close contact and interactive times. Temperatures were checked upon arrival each morning and a brief health history obtained. Work areas were situated six feet apart except for students from the same family.

Students were responsible for logging into their instruction and assignments, completing assignments, and finishing their work in a timely manner. Assistance was available from the supervisor and assistant, but no actual teaching was done.

As with any new program, we encountered several unforeseen problems. Keeping track of schedules for different grade levels in three separate school districts was a challenge. The amount of free time was severely underestimated. The volunteers and supervisors were constantly finding new activities to keep the children occupied. Outdoor activi-

ties were included except during inclement weather.

Each family from the community had to agree to Christian religious instruction. Students learned and recited the Lord's Prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance each morning and listened to Bible stories each afternoon. In addition, the children created two large projects explaining the Creation and Noah's Ark. Their artwork and story were presented during a Sunday morning service with all parents attending.

By April 1, 2021, all students were attending in-person school instruction except for Wednesdays which was a virtual day. Since we had guaranteed our supervisor full-time employment for the entire school year whether the classroom was in session or not, we continued to provide supervision one day per week.

We hadn't established any metrics to quantify the benefits and successes of the program. However, we were able to make several observational assessments. First, the parents were thrilled with the progress their children made, many stating that grades were superior to those observed during previous

in-person school instruction. Second, parents were amazed that the students gave clear, confident public presentations of their projects during the church service. In addition, several unchurched children were introduced to the gospel. Three families petitioned us to establish a summer program. Perhaps the greatest compliment came from the local elementary school which began referring students who were doing very poorly with at-home supervision. Lastly, this program provided emotional, spiritual, and financial support to our classroom supervisor who was experiencing personal difficulties at the time.

The West Side church board concluded that this was an effective outreach to the community, provided assistance to our church families, and challenged the congregation financially.

Fortunately, the 2021-2022 school year has not necessitated a return to the supervised classroom. But by having the previous experience, West Side is ready and able in the future.

David Kent is the pastor of the West Side Brethren in Christ Church, Chambersburg, PA.

Some Pleasant COVID Surprises

By Zach Spidel

COVID-19 HAS SURPRISED me in multiple ways. While some of these surprises have been of the nasty variety, a number of them have been most welcome. Wishing to be an encouragement to you in discouraging times, here are some of those pleasant surprises.

First, I have been surprised by the potential for blessing in digital forms of fellowship. I say this as someone who has been highly skeptical of attempts to build church community online in the past. I have written in this very space before about my own abandonment of social media and my conviction that the large online ecosystems, their parent corporations, and those corporations' algorithms are a mostly pernicious presence in our lives and should be used very sparingly indeed. I still believe that, but circumstances have shown me that within certain limits,

under the right conditions, and using the right tools, online fellowship can be a blessing that brings glory to God.

For instance, even long after we returned to in-person services, we have members whose physical health will not allow them to join us. Because COVID led us to start hosting our services live on Zoom, these members can join in. During sharing time these saints—most of them elderly and struggling with some degree of isolation—can speak up over the connection and share a testimony or a prayer concern. They partake with us in prayer and converse with us live through a Zoom window. Is it as good as being there physically? No, and those who must connect this way wouldn't say it is either. But is it far better than not being able to participate at all or simply watching a recording of the service later? All our folks in this situation



would say a hearty yes! I imagine we will always hold our services over some live-connection service so that those physically ill or otherwise restrained can still join us in a fashion that allows for genuine, if limited, sharing.

A second surprise has been the faithful persistence of God's people in the midst of highly unfavorable circumstances. Have some dropped away from the church? Have some opted for Zoom when they were a bit sleepy rather than ill or truly concerned about contagion? Have there been disagreements over how to deal with the realities of

the pandemic itself? Yes, to all three questions, but that sort of thing is just what you'd expect if you were only counting on human factors. What has been delightfully surprising to me has been the quiet, faithful persistence of the bulk of God's people in staying connected to and serving the church even when church life has been at its most limited and frustrating during the pandemic. That can only be accounted for by the ever-surprising Spirit of God!

I think about how my sister Delores—in her mid 80s and totally ignorant of digital technologies—could only attend church over the telephone (she called in to Zoom using her landline). She would sit with the receiver of that old landline to her ear for 90 minutes each Sunday. She'd cry sometimes during sharing and tell us how much she missed us, and she'd share a story about how God was keeping her company in the house she had to herself following her husband's recent death. We'd cry with her and pray, and then we'd come back for more of the same the next week. People kept logging in, people kept reaching out, people kept holding onto God and to each other through the worst of it despite how frustrating and unsatisfying all that was.

We returned to in-person services earlier

than many of our peer churches because Delores (and many more like her who didn't even have landlines they could use) were desperate for fellowship. We made a prudential judgment weighing the dangers of isolation against the dangers of physical contagion and decided we needed to make in-person services happen—as safely as we could—for those who had no way to connect to us online or who (because of struggles with depression, addiction, or other emotional issues) really did urgently need in-person fellowship. This return was the occasion of another surprise.

Despite the heated and partisan nature of the discussions around COVID precautions, and despite the fact that our own church contained those more and those less concerned about the risks of the pandemic, we were able to agree on a course of action. Our consensus didn't emerge overnight, and there were times when all of us had to accept things we wouldn't have chosen in isolation, but we found it was possible to walk together in fellowship even if we did not all share the same assessments of the pandemic or the same set of preferred policies. More than that, we found ourselves in a position, over the last year, to begin multiple new ministries or ministry partnerships. On Thursday

evenings, a Jesus-centered drug and alcohol recovery program uses our building for their weekly meetings. On Friday evenings, a Narcotics Anonymous meeting attracts 50-60 people from our neighborhood. On Fridays, in the afternoon, we provide warm meals and access to our new and extensive clothing closet to neighborhood people in need. All three of these ministries began under COVID conditions, all do things that must be done in person if they're to be done well or at all, and all were initiatives we were able to agree on together, despite the difficult climate for discussion.

In an age when so many seem commitment-phobic, I know some people in whom God has instilled commitment through difficulty. In an age of discord, I know some people who were led by the Spirit to work in harmony for the sake of Jesus' Kingdom. In the midst of difficulties and deprivations, I know people for whom Jesus multiplies the scant sustenance of online fellowship and makes it enough when it has to be enough. What wonderful surprises these have been!

Zach Spidel is pastor of The Shepherd's Table, Dayton, OH.

Deconstruction in the Age of COVID

By Christina Embree

"I DON'T BELIEVE in God anymore."
"I don't know if I believe in God anymore."

"I don't know what I believe about God."

Over the past two years, I've heard these sentences more times than I can remember. I am hearing them all over social media, in magazine articles, blog posts, radio programs, podcasts, and sermons. Most of the time, the comments fall under one broad term: Deconstruction.

Deconstruction appears to be a "buzz word" within the Christian and ex-Christian community. A significant uptick coincided with the beginning of a global pandemic that moved many people from in-person community and into a much wider virtual community. Younger people (Millennial and Gen Z

generations) quickly adapted to this form of communication, finding solace in a global community that "gets" them. Those who are deconstructing from their faith have used the platform to process, protest, and project their experiences, gaining traction among those who already felt frustrated and disenfranchised by the evangelical church. This article seeks to define deconstruction, where it came from, and how the current movement was impacted by the COVID pandemic.

The history of deconstruction

While deconstruction has become a rather familiar term in evangelical circles, the concept of deconstruction has been around for centuries. The term did not initially refer to a theological context but rather a philosophical one. Coined by French philosopher

Jacques Derrida, the concept of deconstruction referred primarily to questioning the conceptual frameworks of Western philosophy, including social sciences, humanities and literature.¹

In the 2000s, the term became more common place in descriptions of experiences related to questions of faith and relevance.² In 2016, Richard Rohr, a well-known leader in spiritual formation, published a work called "An Invitation to Grace" where he reflects on Walter Brueggeman's work describing the Christian walk as a journey through the Torah (rules/law) to the prophets (criticism for those rules) to wisdom literature (resolution leading to wisdom).³ In his reflection, Rohr offers the following sequence for this journey: order, disorder, and reorder.⁴

This sequencing has been seen by some as the catalyst on the deconstruction journey with the second stage of disorder taking the focus as the modern evangelical version of deconstruction.⁵ True to Rohr's prediction, the location of young people in this second stage has become a major characteristic of the current deconstruction movement.

This movement from initial understandings of one's faith through a time of questioning or deconstructing into a time of reaffirmation or reconstruction is neither new or unusual. For example, in Acts 10, Peter goes to the roof to pray and has a vision of a cloth being lowered from heaven. On it are a number of "unclean" animals and he is told by a voice to "kill and eat" these animals. Peter immediately refuses because eating these animals is prohibited by the law (order). The voice replies that Peter should no longer call things impure that God has made pure (disorder). Peter is wondering what this could mean when a group of Gentile believers shows up at his house and the Spirit of God tells Peter to go with them. When he arrives at the host's home, he says: "It is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile [order]. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean [disorder]. So when I was sent for, I came without raising an objection [reorder]" (Acts 10:28, 29).

Why has deconstruction taken on such a life of its own? Why, if it is a natural journey of faith, has it become something of an affront to the evangelical church? For this conversation, we must look at the deconstruction movement during COVID when it found a growing community online.

Deconstruction and social media in the age of COVID

In March 2020, the normal gathering and communal practices of life in America were fundamentally altered. For those who found identity and continuity in Sunday church gatherings, this change was especially challenging. Moving community online was challenging, but it was actually a boon to those who were already online.

Since March 2020, Americans have spent, on average, an additional 1-2 hours on social media per day as compared to pre-pandemic numbers.⁶ Social media platforms gained users at unprecedented rates with In-

stagram increasing by 16 percent, Facebook by 19 percent, and Reddit by 30 percent.⁷ By far the greatest growth was on TikTok. By the time the pandemic began to shut down communities across the globe, TikTok had been downloaded 315 million times, and in June 2020 it gained another 87 million users in just one month, effectively making it the app of choice for the pandemic.⁸

As a minister who works directly with younger generations, I have made it a practice to be where those generations can be found. It wasn't long before I stumbled across Deconstruction TikTok. To date, the hashtag #deconstruction has 208.5 million views and #deconstructiontiktok has 8.1 million followers.⁹ If you click on the hashtag, you quickly discover that the deconstruction being discussed is not the philosophical version, but the evangelical version.

The vast majority of TikTok users are from the Millennial and Gen Z populations. The content creators fall between the extremes of outright rejection of God and religion to simply questioning the morals and beliefs that one has been raised to embrace. The popularity of the movement and its online community is formidable.

Therein lies the reason for the current focus on deconstruction in evangelical Christian circles, both by those who are in the stage of deconstruction and those who are calling attention to it from the pulpit. People who are growing in their faith and relationship with God have always moved through this journey, but without the vocal and visual support of a community. How should we respond when we meet someone who tells us that they are deconstructing?

Responding to deconstruction

In my current role as pastor, I have interactions weekly with people who say they are deconstructing. While some are rejecting God and Christianity, most find themselves in a place of questioning and discernment. The majority affirm their belief in Jesus but are working through the nuances of their faith and how they should live it out in the world today.¹⁰

Here are a few tips that can be helpful in journeying with self-identified deconstructionists.

Assess what they are deconstructing. Because the label of deconstruction is being

used to describe everything from deconversion and rejection to discerning and questioning, it's important to actually listen to the individual and hear where they are on their journey. Don't assume you know what the label means.

Offer new language. Often those who are deconstructing label themselves because they don't have other verbiage to use and are just adopting the terminology of the culture. I often speak to people about "decluttering" or getting rid of beliefs or teachings that have clouded their view of Jesus.

Normalize the journey: It can be scary, especially for those who have grown up in a strict religious setting, to view the journey of order, disorder, and reorder as anything other than sacrilegious and heretical. Asking questions, expressing doubt, or rejecting certain teachings can feel wrong or sinful when, in fact, they can be markers of spiritual growth and maturity.

Offer to journey with them: Nothing is more isolating than feeling on the outside of a group you've always been inside. By offering to journey with them, at their pace and in their way, we can become an important part of their spiritual community and offer the support and guidance needed for healthy growth.

Recognize God's work. Ultimately, the relationship of acceptance or rejection of God is not something we can control. God alone can speak to hearts and bring answers to life's deepest questions. Our job is to lift Jesus high, to love God, and to love others. It's God's job to speak to their hearts.

It's important to recognize that no one has arrived at a place of fully knowing and to remain humble as we allow God to challenge, teach, and shape us to become more and more the image of his Son. Deconstruction can merely be a step on our journey and one that, if done surrounded by the grace of God and love of community, can lead us to love God and love others even more.

Notes

¹*Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "deconstruction," October 20, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/deconstruction>.

²James J. Dicenso, "Deconstruction and the Philosophy of Religion: World Affirmation and Critique," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*

31, no. 1 (February 1992): 29-43, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01539179>.

³Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012).

⁴Richard Rohr, "The Invitation of Grace," Center for Action and Contemplation, March 21, 2016, <https://cac.org/the-invitation-of-grace-2016-03-21/>.

⁵Kurtis Vanderpool, "The Age of Deconstruction and the Future of the Church," *Relevant Magazine*, April 4, 2021, [https://www.relevantmagazine.com/faith/the-age-of-deconstruction-and-future-of-the-](https://www.relevantmagazine.com/faith/the-age-of-deconstruction-and-future-of-the-church/)

[church/](https://www.relevantmagazine.com/faith/the-age-of-deconstruction-and-future-of-the-church/).

⁶"Additional daily time spent on social media platforms by users in the United States due to coronavirus pandemic as of March 2020," Statista, January 28, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1116148/more-time-spent-social-media-platforms-users-usa-coronavirus/>.

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¹⁰Randy Hardman, "Deconstruction, Deconversion, and Ex-vangelicalism," January 1, 2022, <https://www.randyhardman.com/post/deconstruction-deconversion-and-ex-vangelicalism>.

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Pastoral Challenges During COVID-19

EDITOR'S NOTE: In an effort to get a cross-section of pastoral experiences during the pandemic, I sent some questions to a number of pastors across the US. I heard from seven: Dale Engle, Abilene, KS; Tim Fisher, Walkersville, MD; Lynda Gephart, Harrisburg, PA; Tracie Hunter, Western Hills, Cincinnati, OH; José Rodriguez, Esmirna, Miami, FL; Ryan Showalter, Solid Ground, Rancho Cucamonga, CA; and Ron Slabaugh, Messiah Village, Mechanicsburg, PA (see page 12 for Ron's response).

How has your congregation fared during COVID? For example, how have you struggled and how has the pandemic strengthened the church?

Dale: We have several who have not returned (average attendance is about 25). This is hard since we are so small. Because we have an older congregation, there is lots of timidity even now about what we do when—especially eating together. We lost a key individual to COVID and that hit us hard.

Tim: With little notice, we were forced into the world of virtual services. Several people in the congregation really "stepped up" to make this a reality, and we now offer virtual services through YouTube, our church website, and our church app.

Lynda: The largest struggle has been not seeing people in person. Though we have in-person services, many people have not yet returned to attending worship services. We haven't had our Wednesday Community Meal for almost two years. Another struggle

was having time to contact people in ways we didn't need to when we saw them regularly—like pre-recorded services, Zoom services, live-stream services, and communicating via a weekly email newsletter. I also became aware that government assistance was not available to undocumented people. When businesses shut down, they lost their ability to work and earn income, but without the safety net provided to most of the population. Our church paid several months rent for one household we knew was affected in this way. The church staff determined early on that we would love and care for the most vulnerable among us.

Tracie: COVID impacted our attendance after we returned to in-person services in June 2020. We picked up a few people after their churches closed and we remained open. We converted a few visitors into new members. The drop in attendance has really hit our finances even though we offer electronic giving methods.

José: COVID has been a trial for many, and in a sense has hurt the church. Attendance has dropped considerably. Some families never came back after March 15, 2020.

If you have lost or gained people during the pandemic, why do you think that is?

Dale: We lost only one couple but they have affected a second one. I'm not as sure it is COVID as it is using that as the excuse. Both use online services but not necessarily ours.

Tim: Overall, we have gained people, albeit from a mostly virtual community. In-person

attendance continues to be one-half to two-thirds pre-COVID attendance, and less than half for higher attendance services such as Christmas Eve and Easter Sunday. We have seen people drop off altogether, and much of this is simply finding other Sunday morning priorities. I am unaware of any of these as being lost altogether, as we have been intentional in communication with them.

Lynda: We have definitely lost people, some of whom have said they don't like how we handled COVID (we were too cautious). And we have definitely gained some people, especially people who were happy about how we were handling COVID (cautious). There are definitely people who I wonder if they will ever come back to church. Some people have said that they have liked having their Sunday free.

José: Yes, we have lost people due to the pandemic. Several families that never came back are not going to any church. Those families left the church out of fear.

Ryan: We have lost a number of long-time attendees while gaining a few new ones, but overall attendance is down. One of the hardest parts is the loss of volunteers, which has made it challenging to provide ministries we used to take for granted. This form of pruning is difficult, but we look to God for how he will lead us, believing that even this does not take him by surprise.

How have you navigated controversies about in-person or virtual services, vaccines, masking, etc.? How did your decisions affect people's at-

tendance and participation?

Dale: We've tried to be respectful—there are many not vaccinated or willing to wear masks. We refused to “kick out” anyone without a mask even during our strictest time of mask mandates. We did close for about a month when our county threatened fining the pastor or owner of any establishment who didn't “require” masks. We posted signs, offered masks, distanced all seating, had tape marks on the floors as reminders of distance, don't take offerings but use plates at the back, have hand sanitizer in as many visible places as possible. We cancelled our community dinners.

Tim: One of the most painful experiences was the loss of a husband and wife who left the church when we posted a requirement for masks for in-person worship. Without any communication, this husband and wife left the church after being a part of the community for almost 25 years. That hurt. We also decided we would not police mask usage, as we recognized that some will not mask due to pre-existing medical and/or personal convictions.

Lynda: We have leaned into communicating love and care for the most vulnerable and have stayed out of political discussions. And we make decisions on the cautious side. Some people have said they aren't coming because we require masks. We hope they're staying connected, but we're not making decisions based on their preferences.

Tracie: We made masking mandatory, which some people don't like. But we put the safety of our congregants over individual preferences in that area. We have encouraged our congregants to make the best decisions for their families, regarding the vaccination because it is a decision that could pose health consequences either way.

José: Since June 2020, we have been in-person with virtual services. Masking has been voluntary. Our decisions have not affected participation and attendance.

What long-term lessons has this pandemic taught you specifically or the church in general?

Dale: We need to be more intentional in our interactions and care of each other, with more checking in and more respect.

Tim: We do church both in-person and virtually, with the majority of participation

being virtual. This has resulted in the double-edged sword of reaching more people numerically, while have less volunteers than before.

Ryan: The things that are most important to us are often shaped by our experiences. How we view politics, race, science, and even scripture is shaped by what we have been taught and experienced. That means if someone disagrees with me, it is important to get curious and start asking questions, rather than simply putting labels on them.

How has the pandemic changed the way you do church (e.g., how have you modified, upgraded, or developed technology)?

Dale: We did a major upgrade to technology several years ago, and now we have updated to live streaming with additional lighting, cameras, etc.

Tim: It has been difficult seeing the level of fear present in the people of God, and I have urged the church to walk in faith, not fear on the one side or foolishness on the other. I wonder how much of our Christian witness has been affected by fear during the pandemic. The practice of the church throughout the ages has been moving toward the lepers or diseased, even at the risk of one's life. This should be a significant conversation within the church as a whole.

Lynda: Committee meetings on Zoom have been so helpful. We never live-streamed our services before, but I'm sure we always will now. We no longer have a Sunday bulletin, but began a weekly email newsletter as our major form of communication. We've done hybrid gatherings with missionary speakers; anyone can come and share with us and they don't have to actually come in person.

Tracie: We use Zoom, incorporated our messages into our website, and bought a new TV to assist the praise team. We do all of our Bible studies on Zoom.

Ryan: The pandemic shifted our view of online church from being optional to essential. When we were first forced online we had to rethink what it meant to be the church. One of the most important things we did was to find an online campus pastor whose specific job was to welcome people, just like you would in a church lobby. We found it wasn't just the “welcome, where are you watching from?” that mattered, but the sharing of the

“Amen” and commenting on what stood out in the service that provided feedback and created more interaction than we often got during in-person gatherings. It was important for the person watching the service to know that there was someone live on the other end who was interacting with them and was available for prayer, and that the service was not simply some repacked media.

Describe any special ministries during the pandemic aimed at helping people who had particular challenges with school, employment, etc.

Tim: Our giving to the ministries in Southeast India that we support increased, as many of these already impoverished pastors were on complete lockdown by their local governments. We also hosted a virtual pastor's conference for 100 pastors in India for encouragement during these difficult times.

Lynda: Carmen Dones, our outreach pastor, developed citizenship classes for immigrants who have a green card to help prepare them for the exam. We enhanced our food pantry ministry by giving out more personal/household items in addition to food. We were able to buy bulk supplies from our custodial supplier, which helped many struggling families. We began to share our building with our neighbor business during COVID; we think it's a good way to use our space

José: The congregation has been taking care of each other, delivering cooked food to ill families, along with food staples and cash to help when folks haven't been able to work and get paid.

Ryan: One of the ministries of our church is Alta Loma Christian School. I have been amazed at how they have worked to honor God and the government requirements. Our school was one of the first to re-open and we worked with the county to set best practices that were tracked and later used by public schools. Because of the integrity and hard work of our teachers and school leaders, the school grew to the largest enrollment in its history. We feel blessed by the missional engagement our school has in our community and the new opportunities to connect new families to a vibrant Christian community.

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Pandemic Pastoring at a Retirement Community

By Ron Slabaugh

THE MESSIAH VILLAGE congregation is embedded within a health care retirement community. Regarding how we have fared, I ask myself, “How does one measure that?” Do I measure it by attendance, financial giving, change in ministries, or other struggles and challenges within the congregation? The first and most obvious change for us was the lockdown in March 2020. For an entire year we were unable to meet in the Village chapel which meant having to record and replay a Sunday service over our in-house TV channel each week. That also meant preaching to a TV camera with no audience. What a different experience!

Our first in-person service was held on Easter Sunday 2021 with an attendance cap of 25 persons in the chapel due to government healthcare guidelines. Then the AV system in the chapel began to break down (it is 12 years old) and we were unable to broadcast live. In fact, we had to move to another location on campus in mid-July 2021. The attendance limit there is 51 and we are not able to broadcast or live stream from that location. So the service is recorded and played on MVTV (our in-house TV channel) one week later. This means that during holiday occasions people see the service on MVTV after the holiday is over. So we have had two significant disruptions—COVID and the

AV system breakdown.

To give a bit more perspective on these dynamics, our average attendance in 2019 was about 140, with persons able to attend from all levels of campus living including nursing. Since the beginning of COVID, no nursing residents have been allowed to attend. Also, since the building where we can worship on Sunday is located elsewhere on campus, many persons in Enhanced Living (once called Assisted Living) are unable to get there. Therefore, our attendance has declined from 140 to 45 this past year.

Due to all the restrictions and the breakdown of the chapel AV system, many folks have expressed disappointment. However, in spite of this, giving has only decreased by about 17 percent. I have been amazed at the resiliency of the congregation. Though experiencing much disruption and disappointment, our support of missionaries and other local ministries has continued unabated.

I think I have preached more messages on the theme of “hope” in the past 24 months than the previous 24 years. It seems that in this time of so much change and uncertainty, the only thing that remains unchanged is Jesus and the hope of heaven and eternal life. He is the unmovable rock of our salvation. He remains the same and the presence of the Holy Spirit is just as real as ever. In spite of

change, upheaval, and disappointment, our faith in him can remain unshaken. I think of the third verse of, “A Mighty Fortress,” which says, “And though this world with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, we will not fear, for God hath willed his truth and triumph through us.” And to that I say, “AMEN!!”

The past two years have been some of the most frustrating in my 40-plus years of ministry due to the inability to plan ahead when the rules and guidelines keep changing from week to week and month to month. The chapel AV system still remains inoperative due to the back order of parts that need to be replaced but are unavailable at the moment. Only God knows what lies ahead. Therefore, my hope and trust is in him and him alone as I look forward to the future.

Ron Slabaugh is senior pastor of the Messiah Village Brethren in Christ Church at Messiah Lifeways, Mechanicsburg, PA.