

Eileen D. Crowley: One Small Episcopal Parish Goes Online to Worship and Stay Together

On March 15, 2020, Bishop Jeffrey Lee suspended all in-person Episcopal church services in the Diocese of Chicago, Illinois, in the US. At All Saints' Episcopal Church, four members of the pastoral team, along with a very actively involved Worship Committee of lay people, suddenly had to figure out how to continue to celebrate the liturgy with their faith community by using iPhones and social media.

The team was relatively new and inexperienced. Having arrived at All Saints just four weeks before, Interim Rector Rev. Dr. Stephen Applegate had come to help guide the parish through the 12- to 18-month process of searching for a new rector after the departure of their previous rector who had become a bishop, and to work with Associate Rector Rev. Andrew Rutledge, who was working to keep the parish "ship afloat". Rev. Andrew had been ordained for less than a year, but Priest Associate Rev. Courtney Reid, who became a part-time member of the pastoral team, had only been ordained for four weeks. Colin Collette was the longest serving member of the pastoral team; he had served as Director of Music since 2017 and had decades of church music experience at other parishes.

Before these four liturgical leaders hardly had a chance to get to know each other, they had to spring into action to respond to the unprecedented ramifications of the Covid-19 pandemic. Interim Rector Rev. Stephen recalls, "I arrived on February 17 and had three Sundays with people in church." That was all. His engagement with parishioners, staff, rector search committee members, the vestry, and other groups would henceforth be via phone, email, text, Facetime, and Zoom.

On that Third Sunday of Lent, March 15, the All Saints' pastoral team scrambled to celebrate Eucharist in an otherwise empty sanctuary. Over previous months, Rev. Andrew had been live-streaming Morning Prayer on Instagram with his iPhone, so they put his experience to good use. They placed that iPhone on a tripod and had to choreograph how best to perform the liturgy within the video and audio limitations of that device. But at the receiving end the audio level was weak, and some people's Facebook feeds occasionally stalled or froze altogether. Parishioners nonetheless persevered and showed up to celebrate Eucharist online for the first time, via Facebook Live. The sight of the church's empty pews was depressing; it symbolized all that they had lost, all the people they could not meet, all the fellow worshipers they could no longer hug.

Before the arrival of COVID-19, the average All Saints' Sunday worship attendance was just under 300 adults and children. On the first Sunday that All Saints' live-streamed their celebration of the Eucharist from the church sanctuary, Facebook data indicated that a similar number of people attended online.

Worshippers took full advantage of the live comment feature on Facebook. They posted 223 times, and launched 103 emojis over the course of the service. They wished each other "Good morning" and "Peace and safety in this sad time." They sent virtual hugs and love. They were spreading good humor, one of the characteristics of All Saints'. "I'm singing the bass part. Anyone singing along?" asked one parishioner.

On Facebook some members posted photos of the special settings they had prepared for celebrating Eucharist, including special cups and glasses for wine, china to hold their homemade bread, candles, linens, crosses, and the Book of Common Prayer. Interim Rector Rev. Stephen noted:

We have been purposely vague about what is happening when the eucharist is being celebrated at one end of the camera-tv/computer/handheld device. I see this as consistent with Anglican/Episcopal eucharistic theology which, while believing in the Real Presence of Christ in the sacrament, is agnostic about how that happens.... People's laying out bread and wine seems to have been a spontaneous response. I learned about it fairly quickly through Facebook I never addressed the issue – whether people should or shouldn't do that – what was happening when they received bread and wine. The important thing to me was and is that people are being “fed” through the service, and that they feel a sense of closeness and connection to God and to one another by participating.

Before the following Sunday, the Chicago bishop sent out additional guidelines regarding online worship. Churches were not to record or livestream their services in empty churches, as All Saints' had done the week before. Of course, the bishop reminded everyone, Eucharist could only be celebrated if there were two people present.

While many parishes chose to record or live stream Morning Prayer or a Liturgy of the Word, often referred to as an AnteCommunion service, All Saints' leadership chose to continue celebrating Eucharist. Rev. Stephen shared how they came to that decision:

All Saints' Sunday services before the pandemic were all Holy Eucharist. We wanted a pastoral response to the uncertainty, fear, and loss that we anticipated people were going to be feeling. We did not feel that we ought to change the form of the Sunday service. And we thought that changing to something different like Morning Prayer or AnteCommunion was not the right pastoral response – regardless of what eucharistic theologians were saying.

Meanwhile, the bishop instructed all clergy and lay personnel to work from home. They were not even supposed to go into their churches! Fortunately for All Saints', the Interim Rector's wife, Terry Applegate, came from Ohio to join him in the lock-down in the rectory. Because of her presence, that next Sunday, Week 2, the Applegates were able to celebrate and livestream the March 22 Eucharist from the rectory dining room.

A first-grade teacher skilled in making classroom art, Terry decorated the dining room's French doors with colored paper in a geometric pattern similar to the pattern found on the sanctuary's 19th-century stained glass windows. Fortuitously, both Applegates were singers, and Rev. Stephen could play guitar. That Sunday they served in more liturgical and technical roles than they could ever have imagined: as environmental artists, music ministers, reader/acolyte, presider/preachers, videographers, and media producers.

During the Week 3 Eucharist, worshipers were grateful to experience another innovation—Rev. Andrew's pre-recorded sermon. It appeared on a TV monitor placed on the dining room table, the iPhone turned to the screen for all to see. During the service, worshipers posted their liturgical responses of “Amen” and “Thanks be to God” and “Peace be with you.” Many sang the songs at home. Some parishioners had set up their home altars in relationship to their largest TV screen.

Rev. Andrew, who became the parish's *de facto* media producer, invited people to submit their family photos. Using those new photos and ones already in the parish files, the pastoral leaders printed out large photos of parishioners and used pipe cleaners to hang them on the pews. The photos filled the church with faces and gave delight to those who a few weeks earlier had seen an empty church.

Meanwhile, the Director of Music, Colin Collette, was producing music tracks for choir members to use in recording their parts for music for the whole Sunday service, including the special music for Holy Week/Easter Triduum services. A parish volunteer edited the individual audio submissions together into choral songs.

Rev. Andrew produced the dynamic equivalent of a Palm Sunday procession for Week 4. A video montage of photographs from previous Palm Sunday processions visually brought worshipers from the parish hall, down the sidewalks, up the front stairs and doors into the worship space where the lively song, "We are marching in the light of God," seemed to be rocking the community. Parishioners posted 179 comments during that Palm Sunday worship, including, "Good morning all. Is the choir lined up?" "Palms look great."

Teams of volunteers, including Worship Committee members, worked intensively before and during Holy Week to produce a variety of online liturgies that were live-streamed on Facebook. Rev. Andrew offered an online healing service from his home. Lay members used their iPhones and Zoom to record scripture, poetry, and intercessions. They led the Wednesday Tenebrae, Good Friday Stations of the Cross, and Good Friday evening liturgy. For the evening service, the talented actors of the All Saints' Players recorded an original one-act play on Zoom, in which they retold the story of the Passion through the eyes of Mary Magdalen and Jesus's other disciples.

Collaborating closely, the pastoral team and parishioners kept up the All Saints' commitment to provide excellent, creative proclamation of a variety of scripture and scripture-based stories for Easter Vigil and Easter Sunday. The pastoral team and dozens of lay people did whatever they could to create these Triduum online liturgies, so that worshipers could celebrate and participate actively at home. They invited worshipers to prepare ahead of time to venerate their own crosses, to light their own candles, to be ready to bless themselves with water in remembrance of their baptism, and to use their home-printed worship aids to respond as usual to ritual dialogue and to sing service parts and congregational songs. Only on Easter Sunday morning did liturgy come once again streamed live from the rectory dining room, with a pre-recorded Liturgy of the Word shown on the TV monitor via an iPhone directed at the screen.

Easter Sunday was the fifth week of online liturgy for the All Saints' community. The worship leaders had learned much, but they were still having technical difficulties. Too many churches were using Facebook at the same time. Worshipers experienced frozen screens on occasion and had to go out of and back into that platform, sometimes multiple times during one service.

Although all of this media was being produced by amateurs, worshipers continued to log on and to participate in these online liturgies. According to Facebook data, attendance at these virtual services continued to be equivalent to pre-Covid-19 attendance.

In response to a post-Easter survey of parishioners' experience of online liturgy, people expressed much gratitude. One said that their favorite aspect was "knowing that

there are others from our community praying at the same time as I am.” Others responded:

That I can finally attend a worship service. I am elderly and live a distance from All Saints'....The best thing about the virtual service is the care taken by the worship team to involve the visual senses in a variety of ways, so that the service doesn't become a screen with talking heads.

I like to see the faces and hear the voices of people I know.... I could watch, listen to, or read any Episcopal church service to encounter the same words of the liturgy. Seeing my friends, and hearing their voices, and experiencing the elements of joy, play, passion, and creativity that All Saints worship entails, is the best.

Given the many challenges of offering a live service with no media professionals to rely on and no budget for new equipment other than the purchase of an iMac for editing, All Saints' leadership chose to move to entirely pre-recorded worship as of May 24, ten weeks into offering online worship. Parishioners did not seem to notice any difference. They were just glad the liturgy now went off without a “glitch.”

On June 28, Week 17, Sunday Eucharist once again was offered in the parish sanctuary, by reservation-only at 8 a.m. and 11 a.m. Priests and parishioners all wore masks and kept physically distant from each other. Each week since, fewer than a dozen people have attended each of these services. Before starting in-person worship, the pastoral team announced that the online 9 a.m. Eucharist would continue to be the parish's main liturgy for the foreseeable future.

During a typical online Sunday Eucharist, worshipers see more than a dozen different faces each week, and even more on Youth Sunday when more than 20 children and teens took on every liturgical role other than presider. Seeing each others' faces has continued to be very important to All Saints' worshipers who, for decades, have worshiped in a church with a diamond-shaped seating arrangement that has meant that every week they could easily see and hear each other across the central altar. In addition to online worship, All Saints' has continued to try to create opportunities for people to see and greet each other through post-worship coffee Zoom gatherings and through Zoom-enabled Bible studies, Morning Prayer, Night Prayer, and Liturgies for Hard Times.

All Saints' custom of announcing birthdays and anniversaries has gone online. A photo video montage of scores of peoples' faces appears on-screen at the end of the service as the choir is heard singing multiple times, “God, grant them many years.” In the survey, parishioners repeatedly expressed their gratitude for this online translation of their monthly ritual.

Over more than 20 weeks of online liturgy, All Saints' has continued to be All Saints', an Episcopal community that offers spiritual nourishment, creativity and connectedness, as well as many social justice events and programs. Each week, more people started chiming in. As comments come in and emojis float up, the community “gathers and worships actively, joyfully, and together – regardless of forced distancing.” As one parishioner wrote, thanks to online worship, “We are all here together with each other, holding each other up. I feel very blessed.”

Douglas Frimpong-Nnuroh: COVID- 19 and Religious Life in Mary Queen of Peace Catholic Church, Cape Coast, Ghana

The first cases of COVID 19 were reported in Africa in late February 2020, and by March 9, 2020 Burkina Faso, Togo and Cote d'Ivoire had reported cases and the media frenzy in Ghana moved to a high octave.

The first two cases of COVID-19 in Ghana were announced by the Ministry of Health (MOH) in March 2020; this spiralled to 43,260 positive cases by August. President Nana Addo Danquah Akufo Addo announced a raft of measures to deal with the pandemic: closure of the national borders both land and sea, partial lockdown of Greater Kumasi and Greater Accra and Kasoa, the epicentres of the virus at the time. The lockdown was accompanied by restrictions on social activities where only 25 persons could attend private burials, while funerals, weddings and church services were banned until further notice.

In the Cape Coast region, the first case reported on April 8, 2020, was traced to a Reverend Minister who returned from the UK and came to the city to escape the lockdown. Also, fishermen travelling by canoes from neighbouring countries back home who were not screened by port authorities were suspected to have brought the virus into the region which reported 259 cases.

The Parish Priest of Mary Queen of Peace Church in Cape Coast (MQoP), Rev. Fr. David Ocran and his Parochial Vicar Rev. Fr. Emmanuel Adjine used Facebook Live to broadcast virtual sermons daily and Mass on Sundays to parishioners during the lockdown. This allowed parishioners to worship at their homes, even though internet instability and individuals without smart phones or internet access missed the teachings during that period. The Parish Priest proposed a two-way approach to continue the worship. He advocated for a domestic church (ie, a church within worshippers' homes) where he exhorted families to pray and observe the daily readings by meditating on the scriptures. The call for the institution of home study of the Bible by Rev. Fr. Ocran meant that each family could share fellowship together. This gave families a good chance of increasing their religiosity during the dreaded COVID-19 period.

The virus has also affected the sacrament of baptism for children who have attended catechism and thus deemed worthy to partake in the Eucharist during Mass. This is a significant aspect of church growth since these children become the future of the church as they live their faith for a lifetime. Since schools were closed down by the Ghanaian government, the church suspended this medium of instruction. Thus, from March 2020, all catechism lessons remained suspended including the administration of the sacrament of Confirmation after baptism which was officiated by the Archbishop of Cape Coast.

The important ritual of marriage is one of the social activities that were specifically banned in the first restrictions announced by the government in order to control horizontal spread of the virus within communities. Indeed, big weddings are a common feature of the Ghanaian society; during the restrictions, many couples postponed their nuptials until the total lifting of the ban. The Catholic Church is very strict on the sacrament of Holy Matrimony, and a couple must receive it to qualify them to partake in the Eucharist during Mass. At MQoP with a congregation of about 600 worshippers, not celebrating a church wedding since March 2020 due to the corona virus restrictions was a matter of grave concern.