

Fairfield East Association

Spring Meeting, Wednesday May 25, 2022

Success Stories and Innovations during COVID

Participating Churches: First Church of Christ, Congregational Redding; Trumbull Congregational Church; Ridgebury Congregational Church; First Congregational Church of Stratford; First Church Congregational Fairfield; Greenfield Hill Congregational Church; First Congregational Church of Bethel; Olivet Congregational Church; Huntington Congregational Church; Monroe Congregational Church; Unity Hill United Church of Christ; Congregational Church of New Fairfield; King Street United Church of Christ; Lordship Community Church

Participating Pastors:

- Dean Ahlberg, First Church of Christ, Congregational, Redding
- Paul Bryant-Smith, King Street United Church of Christ
- Lisa Eleck, Olivet Congregational Church
- Lucille Fritz, Huntington Congregational Church
- Jenn Gingras, Monroe Congregational Church
- Tim Hare, Trumbull Congregational Church, Trumbull
- Jeff Lukens, Lordship Community Church
- Edward Rawls, First Congregational Church of Stratford, Stratford, CT
- Vanessa Rose, First Church Congregational Fairfield
- Deborah Rundlett, Ridgebury Congregational Church, Ridgefield
- Todd Shipley, Unity Hill United Church of Christ, Trumbull
- Suzanne Wagner, currently supply pastor to Bethel
- Alida Ward, Greenfield Hill
- Liz Yoho, Congregational Church of New Fairfield

Keeping Youth and Children's Programs Vital:

- During the time that was generally reserved for the "children's sermon," I would talk to the kids in attendance about a topic that was also applicable to adults. After the talk I would offer an "assignment," and then later in the service I would check back in for some sharing in response to the assignment. For example, I once spent some time showing and talking about a "sacred object" in my home. Then, I asked the kids to find a sacred object of their own and share it with us at the end of the service. Kids AND adults ended up engaging in these activities, which led to some remarkable, unscripted, sharing that nurtured our faiths and fostered a deeper sense of fellowship within the church. **Trumbull CC**
- Our Confirmation classes. Since there were just 8-9 participants, we could meet, with masks, socially distanced, in our fellowship hall. In the fall of 2020, the class that was suspended earlier in the year met outside and finished up with an outdoor ceremony. **Redding CC**

- First church started doing youth group on the lawn with a firepit. Which ended up being a nice focal point for the group. **First Fairfield CC**
- Church School...Lots of new things tried from ZOOM classrooms to pre-recorded lesson which were made available on You Tube to all weather outdoor classrooms under tents! The children reflected the same type of need and desire to be together and be a vital part of church life! Focus was often one of making and sustaining connections as well as providing a value lesson. Things like Vacation Bible School, Easter Egg Hunts, Halloween trick or treating, Bible presentations, mission days all required creativity and redefining BUT continued to be important vital program components. **Greenfield Hill CC**
- **Youth Groups**...Our youth made it quite apparent early on that they were willing to do most anything to stay connected to one another and to church life. When their summer mission trip to Appalachian Service Project was cancelled in 2020, they came together for a week on-site to create and build together and provide outreach and service locally. They braved all sorts of crazy weather to gather each week in smaller groups (which meant the leaders were present multiple times each week) in order that their program could continue. They met regularly, often masked, for shorter periods of time (and without pizza!) but with the same desire to be present for one another, to work for others, to learn and to be church together! **Greenfield Hill CC**
- We have a large facility which includes a gym and that space is now being used for youth basketball led by a volunteer who has incorporated some opportunities for outreach as part of basketball practice. **Olivet CC**
- **Monroe CC**: We created programs to keep a vital senior high youth group going in-person (saw a 25% increase to average 40 every Sunday night, all from kids not raised at the church and seems to be sticking even as sports programs have begun again.) **Monroe CC**
- Kids ministry: The first 15 months we had Zoom Sunday school which was well attended at first, but towards the end it was just my own kids. Now we do Sunday school 2x a month in person. **Lordship Community Church**
-

Pastoral Care during COVID:

- Our Deacons have been AMAZING providing worship packs, homemade goodies, and tlc. **Ridgebury, CC**
- One of the biggest challenges which continues! So much need for pastoral presence with so little accessibility. Learning and finding new ways to be present for the church community while navigating COVID protocols and restrictions in health care facilities. Arranging for last goodbyes, funerals and memorial services. Also happy life moments like weddings and baptisms and confirmations! So many opportunities for creative ministry (but also at times exhausting). Finding energy and community from one another. **Greenfield Hill CC**
- Held the program, “George’s Hill” for dementia and Alzheimer’s families- a lunch and program support. **Unity Hill**
- Pastoral care was largely accomplished via phone calls. The associate/senior minister split up the list and went through the alphabet, checking in...The routine rituals of communal life -- memorial services were postponed for months...and baptisms performed outdoors during the

summer of '21. Our first baptism scheduled for the meetinghouse during a normal Sunday service will be in early April. We adapted our methodology of Holy Communion -- using purchased, individual kits. **Redding CC**

- The majority of pastoral care has been via the phone & social media. **Lordship Community Church**

Engaging your Church Community:

- We began with a 10-week book group on "The Good and Beautiful God," whose premise is "falling in love with the God whom Jesus knew" by offering chapters on the theme along with "soul training exercises" designed to reinforce our apprehension of this beautiful God. In all honesty, we had mixed feelings about the book because of its theology and context, but the exercises were helpful and our Zoom discussions generated a lot of sharing and growth. Zoom ... has given us an opportunity to expand our reach and build fellowship to degrees we likely wouldn't have experienced without it. Trumbull CC
- Our "Midweek Boost." On Wednesday evenings I led weekly gatherings that featured brief video presentations, discussion, and a prayer exercise of some sort. There was never any homework between sessions and everyone was invited. Sometimes sessions were well attended and sometimes they were not, but the faith sharing was often profound and beautiful. There were many occasions where our discussions on Wednesday evenings fed into my sermons on Sunday mornings. In a way, these "Boosts" were a sustaining force for us during the strictest times of social distancing. Trumbull CC
- We were able to revamp our Open and Affirming discernment process, which culminated in an ONA declaration in Sept. of 2021. We hosted a very festive online auction and Mardi Gras event to raise money for nOURish Bridgeport. We hosted outdoor events when we could (concerts on the lawn, blessing of the animals, worship services, etc.) Trumbull CC
- A Zoom fellowship hour was launched, held every other Friday, at 5:30 PM. It was something of a 30 minute "happy hour" gathering in that folks often toasted one another! Once we were back in the meetinghouse for in-person worship (beginning in mid-June, 2021) those fellowship times were gradually trimmed back and then concluded. The wonderful thing about these Zoom gatherings is that they attracted members who now live in communities from New Hampshire to Maryland to Florida to more local places such as Southbury and New Haven. But the age demographic was narrow -- virtually all were retirees...all except the volunteer host and the senior minister and his wife! Redding CC
- Our first all-church gathering during the COVID-19 era was held in February 2021 at a local farm, and titled the "Farm Frolic." Children dressed up baby goats, and then raced them in a fenced-in area. Very cute!! All ages turned out in numbers. The event got the attention of the Danbury newspaper. There was an obvious hunger for fellowship, but in those pre-vaccination days, less obvious ways to fulfill that hunger. Redding CC

- We hired a food truck to provide lunch on our "Rally Sunday"...and it was a hit. We also had two visits by an ice cream truck for free ice cream following worship (one during the summer, the other during the early fall.) Redding CC
- We have used this time to connect with our neighbors and community through shared passions: arts, environment, social action, and wellness. **Ridgebury CC**
- We're offering a coffee hour on zoom once a week, with no agenda. We did that during COVID and restarting for Lent. **Stratford CC**
- To successfully and safely have a vigil for George Floyd during the lockdown the planners drew circles on the lawn so that families could stay socially distanced. **First Fairfield CC**
- We also found some wonderful benefits to on-line adult ed and bible study classes. David McKinnis ran a class in 2021 using Rob Bell's NOOMA videos and Student Pastor Heidi Butler led a Lenten devotional class in 2021 and 2022. Bible study on Sundays and Wednesdays also was moved on-line. We found that on-line classes allowed a number of people to attend who couldn't have otherwise – those with children, for example, don't need to get baby sitters (we had one couple attend who had small children and in the past most likely one would have gotten to attend and the other would have stayed home), older people who don't like driving at night, or those whose schedules make the travel to church enough of an impediment that they wouldn't go. It has also allowed members who have moved away to continue to be involved with worship and classes. **First Fairfield CC**
- We have continued with all church committees on ZOOM. We initiated a weekly ZOOM devotional and have hosted ZOOM dinners and get together, which were a lot of fun. **Huntington CC**
- **Greenfield Hill**. Lots of good stuff happening here. Common threads coming out of the pandemic definitely focused on the importance of church as community and the need of everyone to feel connected in some way to church life. This was accomplished via a wide variety of ways... Meals/Snack/Treats delivered to those who especially isolated during COVID. Food was purchased from local restaurants (to support their business) and was delivered by volunteers. Connections were created by those fed, those delivering and those providing the food. This was done regularly during the first months of the pandemic and continues to a smaller extent today. **Greenfield Hill CC**
- **Monroe CC**: We adapted the 2021 Strawberry Festival, which netted only a third of what we do in usual years BUT was the first "Festival" in town post-lockdown and did a lot to booster our community spirits. **Monroe CC**
- **Unity Hill**: held Bible studies virtually. Held diaper and food drives. **Unity Hill**
- **King Street UCC**: Our biggest success has been our online worship services, with the children's message videos I produced each week that we were worshipping online only, as well as developing the capability to continue with streaming services, now that we've returned to the sanctuary. The streaming services have remained popular with church members who have small children who aren't able to be vaccinated, as well as with our adult members who are immunocompromised and with some of our seniors who aren't able to get out to attend services. They've also helped keep us connected with members who have moved out of state but who still worship with us on a weekly basis. **King Street UCC**

Successes in Maintaining Worship Services and Outreach/ Mission:

- During the time that was generally reserved for the "children's sermon," I would talk to the kids in attendance about a topic that was also applicable to adults. After the talk I would offer an "assignment," and then later in the service I would check back in for some sharing in response to the assignment. For example, I once spent some time showing and talking about a "sacred object" in my home. Then, I asked the kids to find a sacred object of their own and share it with us at the end of the service. Kids AND adults ended up engaging in these activities, which led to some remarkable, unscripted, sharing that nurtured our faiths and fostered a deeper sense of fellowship within the church. **Trumbull CC**
- We have a tradition of handing out little bells (with an imprint of the church) to the children at (the end!) of our Christmas Eve family service. Since we didn't have such a service in 2020, I had individual bells packaged and mailed to every family in our congregation...to arrive the week or so before Christmas. Very well received. **Redding CC**
- Also in 2020, we prepared a musical "Christmas Card" -- it featured youth readers of the birth story in Luke, adults, the ministers and the choir. It was 11 minutes long...but very complicated to put together. Choir members sang their verses individually, at home. The music was recorded separately. And then everything had to be put together...so sound matched lips, music matched lyrics...etc. It took our volunteer 50 hours of work to perfect the 1-minute verse of "O Come, All Ye Faithful." Amazing dedication. The congregation loved the result. **Redding CC**
- Online Lenten Bible study series (Zoom) were offered in 2020, 2021, and will be again in 2022. The response has been fair -- about a dozen participants. Less than our pre-pandemic, in-person gatherings. **Redding CC**
- Outreach: our teams have continued to provide casseroles for the Dorothy Day soup kitchen throughout the duration...though we stopped serving in-person breakfasts (the space in Danbury couldn't accommodate any social distancing...and just wasn't safe), as well as sandwiches and breakfast foods for parallel DD endeavors. **Redding CC**
- We reinvented Communion. We broke the rules, increased flexibility about what people used for communication. Meg would read the Resurrection story. **Stratford CC**
- Technology Support: We hired a digital media specialist as well as a technology specialist and made a \$80,000 investment in high end cameras, screens and video projection system. We're still getting this implemented since the screen hasn't arrived. We've revamped our website, and are boosting our involvement in Facebook and Instagram. **Stratford CC**
- Our children's music coordinator had families come to the parking lot and learn a song and then it was video taped and used during worship. **First Fairfield CC**
- When people could gather again but not sing together our music coordinator started the bell choir which hadn't been organized for a while. **First Fairfield CC**

- Livestreaming worship through a variety of methods worked well for the congregation. A particular area of the sanctuary was set aside for the children's sermon to give the children a sense or consistency. **First Fairfield CC**
- Worship...continued uninterrupted, at first via online and then in person outdoors before returning to the sanctuary. The church had an online presence prior to the pandemic which facilitated this process. Today, there are folks continuing to worship and support the church who "discovered" the congregation during the pandemic, will probably never attend in person, but feel they are part of the church community. This engagement piece is one of the new challenges being navigated today! One practice that continues today was opening our sanctuary each day from 6:00 a.m. until 9:00 to allow folks the opportunity to pray, light a candle and find sanctuary. Often the pastors provide handouts with inspirational readings, scriptures and prayers for personal faith practice. Music also became a way to be present for folks....concerts and inspirational music amplified so that it could be heard outdoors became the standard early on. The choir gathered wearing their winter coats under their robes to record music for Easter... Lenten weekday concerts played through our Carillion outdoors as folks listened from their cars. **Greenfield Hill CC**
- Mission and Outreach...another challenge as many agencies closed their doors to "hands on" type help but the need for financial support was increased. Finding ways to raise money and provide other relevant opportunities required new approaches but proved to be worth the effort! **Greenfield Hill CC**
- For the on-line Maundy Thursday worship service Rev. Rose led an on-line bread making class before the service for folks who wanted to make their own bread. It worked out well. **First Fairfield CC**
- One of the highlights over the past couple of years has been their music ministry provided by Dana Mancuso who has provided a quality musical experience for the congregation and recently collaborated with First Congregational Church Danbury for a special concert. **Bethel**
- **Olivet:** Lisa was able to develop a ZOOM worship format which continues in hybrid form as some now worship in person (2-4) and others (2-5) remain on ZOOM. They did a special program on Mary for Advent and are doing a Lenten program this spring. **Olivet CC**
- The chief things **Huntington Congregational Church** accomplished in the pandemic was to move to an on-line presence, which has been a good addition to our on-site worship. We live stream our worship services and have more worship participation than we had pre-pandemic because of it. We have also been able to move our Sunday School to virtual and have retained our pre-pandemic attendance. We also increased our outdoor worship opportunities during the warmer months. My pastoral care moved from face to face to phone, email, and texts. It works well. **Huntington CC**
- The Women's Fellowship did a number of drive-through food drives for our local food bank to continue to fill that need. **Huntington CC**
- March 2020- 2021 recorded services every Sunday. March '2021- June 2021 held services in our parking lot; July 21 indoors. **Unity Hill UCC.**
- The church ran the town's food pantry for under two years; the "Bundles of Care" program was developed and continues for 20 adopted families. It included items not covered under the SNAP program. The church has also become more "community minded"; they have gained new people and are more involved in their town. **Congregational Church of New Fairfield.**

- Worship: We were able to make the pivot to high quality online worship rather quickly at the beginning of the pandemic and we learned how to best use Zoom fairly easily. We used that time to research the best ways to do Digital Worship from the sanctuary once it was safe to return, making the switch to a live-stream rather than Zoom worship. We also created some pre-recorded worship services for holidays. **Lordship Community Church**

Big Innovation:

- **From Ridgebury: The Global Citizens program** starting this fall supports the Ridgefield School's mission to provide engaging, relevant, and personalized learning experiences so all students can pursue their interests and prepare for life, learning, and work as global citizens.
 - The Club equips students to lead as global citizens around three key challenges of 21st century leadership:
 - **Environment:** Working to Permaculture to Honor Biodiversity
 - **Community:** Moving between Local and Global Engagement
 - **Leadership:** Learning how to lead intentional change toward flourishing
 - The virtual coaching team is drawn from across the globe:
 - September: Sustainable Happiness Project (Dawson College, Canada)
 - *Canada: Paul MacLean, Pivot Projects Lead for Climate Change Risks & Impacts*
 - October: Leading from the Edge
 - *US: Judi Neal, CEO, Edgewalkers; Academy of Management*
 - November: Lessons from Biomimicry
 - *South Africa: Gamelihle Sibanda, Chief Technical Advisor, United Nations*
 - December: Body Wisdom
 - *US: Karen Buckley, Communicore Consulting*
 - January: Cellular Economy
 - *Ireland: Damian Costello, Pivot Projects Lead for Economics & Finance*
 - February: Unmasking
 - *Nigeria/US, Okokon Udo, Fielding Graduate University*
 - March: Global Consciousness
 - *US: Julia Storberg-Walker, George Washington University*
 - April: One Refugee's Experience
 - *Syria/France: Waël Alafandi*
 - May: Leading Intentional Change
 - *US: Deborah Rundlett, Poets & Prophets*
 - June: Beloved Community: Learnings from MLK
 - *US: Anita Howard, Case Western Reserve University, Organizational Development*
 - Summer Work Trip:
 - Even Years: Global
 - Odd Years: National
 - The on the ground team includes:

- Global Executive Coach Deborah Rundlett, Founder of Poets & Prophets; Lead, Pivot Projects
 - High School Biology Teacher Heather Cochrane, Founder of the Ridgebury Farm
 - Social Entrepreneur John Papa, Owner of West Lane Farm (or another Ridgefield leader)
- The Global Citizens Club engages body and mind through grounded theory and practice to:
 - Foster social and emotional.
 - Promote wellness of body and mind.
 - Build an inclusive climate of trust, safety, and respect.
 - Value diversity by cultivating global competencies.
 - The Club through global partnerships provides real life opportunity to collaborate, innovate and nurture mindfulness, toward deepened emotional and social awareness, knowledge and resilience. **Ridgebury CC**

The Biggest Concern Going Forward:

- It has been more of a challenge this year (2021-2022) as people have been very slow to return to church. I would say we lost 1/3 of our congregation (which is hard when we are so small as it is). We are exploring getting a coach to help us figure out what this next season of ministry will bring. **Lordship Community Church**
- The biggest concern...which has yet to be creatively/effectively addressed, is re-connecting with the "families with children" demographic. We are just beginning to think about how to reach out to families who moved into town during the pandemic... Our new Director of Children's Ministries is using Instagram and TikTok as new communication tools...so we may build on that. Our Facebook page is also getting a face-lift...as is our website. **Redding CC**
- Sunday School isn't coming back. We're beyond fear of being together and safety. I think people are out of the habit of coming. Our Sunday School has been decimated by COVID. **Stratford CC.**

Additional Thoughts:

- We have used this time to rebirth and begin a massive campus revitalization with reclaiming the commons. We are back on the map for the town of Ridgefield and surrounding communities. The reality of this is making the congregation both excited and a bit edgy (after all, all change is loss). We've been successful because we LISTENED to our neighbors, we are seeking to lead from strength and passion, and we are letting go of old models of ministry. **Ridgebury CC**
- Our giving went up over the two years. We're pushing automatic electronic transfer of funds, not pledging as it's easier for people who don't come to church. **Stratford CC**
-