Resiliency
TIME CAPSULE DOCUMENTARY

A project funded through the Louisville Institute 2021 Pastoral Study Project Grant.

The Center for Transformational Leadership
Southern New England Conference
United Church of Christ

Southern New England Conference
Living the Love & Justice of Jesus
A project funded through the Louisville Institute 2021 Pastoral Study Project Grant.
As churches faithfully endeavored to give witness to a liberative gospel and serve its communities, they were forced to respond and be church in innovative, creative and unfamiliar ways.

Future generations will look back in wonder and study how the church journeyed through these pandemics and in some ways thrived. It is important to capture and chronicle now the church’s witness. In capturing the witness, we explore how the church interpreted and responded to the still speaking God in this generation. In doing so, future generations will reflect upon this historic period and see how the church made the faith its own. Just as churches looked back at how we survived other historical periods—civil war, revolutionary war, etc.—as a means to inform their decision-making, so will future generations look back at this historical period.

Over the course of this project, the Southern New England Conference (SNEC) has endeavored to capture and document the experiences of churches within the Southern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ. The SNEC consists of over six hundred churches in the states of Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. The churches are diverse in cultural identity, theological roots, geography, membership size, and budget, thus adding to the richness of diverse ministry approaches/programs and witness during the sustained pandemic season.
Innovations During COVID and Impact on the Future
Racial Injustice
Impact Towards Mission
Frustrations & Lessons Learned

Project leaders studied and investigated church experiences for this project in varied and diverse ways, including requests for multi-media presentations of ministry events and programs, collection of artifacts, and written and video interviews of pastors, church leaders and selected congregants and ministry partners/organizations.

In 2021, all SNEC Area Conference Ministers were asked to recommend churches that they believed would be interested in sharing their stories for the Time Capsule project. SNEC staff attempted to contact all 50 churches that were recommended and asked them to share descriptions of their challenges, innovations, and experiences during 2020.

Of those churches contacted, 25 completed an initial written description detailing their church’s experiences during the pandemic. Responses from these narratives were thematically coded, from which four Key Themes emerged:

- Innovations During COVID and Impact on the Future
- Racial Injustice
- Impact Towards Mission
- Frustrations & Lessons Learned

Specific questions targeting each of these areas were developed for each church, drawing on the experiences and information shared during the written narrative portion of the project. Those churches who participated in the narrative portion of the project were contacted again in early 2022 and asked to participate in a video interview, to help capture their experiences in a multimedia format. Of those invited, 20 participated in follow-up video interviews, with recordings sent to a contracted documentarian for editing. The documentarian utilized footage from each interview to craft four specific documentary videos that speak to the Key Themes identified in this project.

It is our hope that this project will encourage churches to explore transformative and creative ministry that is relevant and more agile in meeting contemporary and social needs of its social location and community context. We hope this project will equip churches to embrace how these pandemics have challenged and changed them, and yet they have created new ministry space, new ministry programs and expanded their community of faith. We hope that churches will continue on this new path of ministry rather than focusing on “when can we go back to normal.”
PROJECT CONTRIBUTORS

This project was funded through the Louisville Institute 2021 Pastoral Study Project Grant. We are thankful for the Louisville Institute for giving us the opportunity to explore and share the stories of churches in our conference. Additionally, we would like to take this space to acknowledge those who have contributed to this project through both their ministries in their churches and their communication with SNEUCC project staff members. We are pleased to share their voices through this documentary project and celebrate their resilience and stewardship during the COVID era.

Video Interview Contributors:

Rev. Matthew Carriker, Agape Spiritual Community
Rev. Dr. Candice Ashenden, Athol Congregational Church
Rev. Christopher Solimene, Avon Congregational Church
Nora Howard, Avon Congregational Church
Rev. Lori Souder, Center Church of South Hadley
Rev. Erick Olsen, Church of Christ Congregational of Norfolk
Rev. Dr. Ruth E. Shaver, Congregational Church of Mansfield
Rev. Dr. Debbie Clark, Edwards Church, UCC of Framingham
Joelle Murchison, Faith Congregational Church of Hartford
Rev. Vicki Kemper, First Church Amherst
Rev. David Jones, First Congregational Church of Ashfield
Rev. Dawn Adams, First Congregational Church of Brimfield
Rev. Donald Remick, First Congregational Church of Randolph
Rev. Julie Cedrone, First Congregational Church in West Boylston
Rev. Cathlin Baker, First Congregational Church of West Tisbury
Rev. Laura Ruth Jarrett, Hope Central Church
Rev. Timoth Sylvia, Newman Congregational Church
Rev. Karen Halac, North Greenwich Congregational Church
Rev. John Hudson, Pilgrim Church
Rev. Deborah Rundlett, Ridgebury Congregational Church
Rev. Dr. Debra Pallatto-Fontaine, Storrs Congregational Church
Rev. Rona Tyndall, West Gloucester Trinitarian Congregational Church, UCC

Narrative Interview Contributors:

First Congregational Church of Georgetown, MA
First Congregational Church of Ridgefield, CT
Holly Brauner, Northeast Association Executive Council
Jane Willan, Paxton Congregational Church, MA

Interviewers for Round One:

Rev. Joe McGarry, Prince of Peace Lutheran Church
Rev. Dr. Todd Yonkman, First Church in Saybrook
Rev. Cheryl Larsen Lawing, St. Matthew Trinitarian Lutheran Church
Rev. Kurt Walker, Deerfield Community Church
Rev. Corey Sanderson, Union Congregational Church

Interviewers for Round 2:

Rev. Joe McGarry, Prince of Peace Lutheran Church
Rev. Kurt Walker, Deerfield Community Church, UCC

Additional Credits:

We would also like to thank Rev. Peggy O’Connor, Rev. Dr. Susan Cartmell, and Rev. Dr. Bruce Epperly for their support of this project.
DOCUMENTARY SEGMENTS AND KEY THEMES

Episode 1: Innovations During COVID and Impact on the Future
In response to new restrictions, many churches throughout the Southern New England Conference embraced a spirit of innovation and used the challenges of 2020 as a catalyst for growth, discovery, and change. In this documentary segment, church leaders speak to the different forms that innovation took within their congregations. From technological enhancements to outdoor services, this segment celebrates the creativity that emerged in 2020 in our conference churches and serves as testimony to the power of resilience during uncertain times.

Episode 2: Impact Towards Mission
The COVID pandemic of 2020 put in place a number of restrictions that impacted the ability of churches to facilitate services, events, and activities that would normally be undertaken to advance their missions and impact their faith and local communities. With limited options to connect with each other and with their larger communities, many aspects of church life were impacted by the pandemic. In this documentary segment, church leaders describe the challenges of this era, including challenges to pastoral care, lack of access to resources within communities, and the overall impact of distanced service delivery on their missions.

Episode 3: Racial Justice
As the COVID Pandemic emerged, issues of racial justice came to the forefront of the nation’s collective consciousness, spurred by the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. As protests and vigils were organized across the country, churches in the Southern New England Conference were moved to approach racial justice with greater rigor than ever. In this documentary segment, church leaders describe their church responses to the racial pandemic of 2020, highlighting organized protests, book groups, and the formation of racial justice structures within their churches to challenge the status quo and actively work towards a more just world, starting with their individual faith communities.

Episode 4: Frustrations and Lessons Learned
In moving out of the pandemic era, churches have had time to process the challenges of the pandemic and to reflect on how to best move forward using the hard-earned knowledge, skills, and resources acquired during the pandemic. While many aspects of the COVID-era church were challenging, churches experienced a number of spiritual revelations that transformed their vision for community and service. In this documentary segment, church leaders speak to their lessons learned and touch on their vision for the post-pandemic church.
How did/(are) they impact your mission and ministry activities?

Both impacted our mission, though the effects of COVID were more acute, rather than the chronic pandemic of racial injustice. Racial injustice has been more chronic and of course didn’t start in 2020. We’ve been intentional about engaging with T J Harper, who served as the Associate for Racial Justice for the Massachusetts Conference, United Church of Christ. The town of Waltham struggles with its diversity in that ethnic groups are siloed, so, we’re trying to work better together. The events of 2020 have prompted us to ask the important questions of how we can better engage with the LGBT community and POC communities. One thing we have done is partner with Chaplains on the Way, including work on for the Nalgene Bottle Project.

How did(is) your church continue to be engaged in innovative, creative, and unfamiliar ways during the COVID-19 shutdown?

We’ve done meditation/teacher training to help to get the community to think of themselves as Contemplative Activists. The first training was in April of 2020 and meditations proceeded every other week through June, with classes on various forms of contemplation offered in the fall. Waltham Public Library has partnered with the church with a monthly book club and has worked with the staff around a mindfulness/self-care intro for the library staff.

What were the low points, failures, or frustrations?

People are stretched so thin. For instance, it’s been hard to give someone a ride to the grocery store.

“Safety comes first” has been a difficult thing to learn when people are reaching out for help, but we’re not able to help as well because of safety issues. Waltham tends to be more of a transitional space for folk who come in and move out.

What were the high points and successes?

We have been planting some seeds about Agape partnering with a school and have asked, “what if we had a school attached to the church?” During April of 2021, a member approached and brought the idea of a Mindful Camp for the community. The member agreed to be the Program Director while another member agreed to be the Outreach Coordinator. The pastor’s Paternity Leave allowed the church to find itself and to find its identity. We saw more leadership initiative and broader leadership.

What lessons, learnings or changes will your congregation carry into the future?

The leadership and direction have felt more like a team effort and we have needed to innovate with technology. There's this idea that we are feeling as though we are in a consistent liminal space. How might we make our worship experience have more of a retreat-type feel to it?
ATHOL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

During 2020, our nation faced two pandemics—the health pandemic of COVID-19 and the pandemic of continuous Racial Injustice. As you think about these two pandemics:

How did they impact your mission and ministry activities?

They forced us to figure out what we’re all about and gave us a reason to do things in a more public way. For example:

- We served a community meal once a month that had real china and entertainment. Approximately 85 people would come! Once the pandemic hit, we started offering Drive-Through Meals. Almost 300 people came!
- We have been Open and Affirming for a few years and started using town land as a billboard, including our "God Loves Them All" display, which was painted by church people. We added more edgy Signage to communicate Open and Affirming commitments.
- We hosted Meetings and Book Reading Group on Zoom
- We offered prerecording Worship on the Local Access Channel.
- We offered on-location services, for example, filming sermons for Sacred Services throughout the country (on a trip to and from CO)

How did your church continue to be engaged in innovative, creative, and unfamiliar ways during the COVID-19 shutdown?

- Recording Sermons
- Recording Day 15 Minute slots: During this recording session, one person sang Call to Worship (couples), Lord’s Prayer (kids), Scripture 119. Different people participated.
- Community Meals
- Phoning around to different places for donations
- During Easter Season we created 250 Lenten Bags, which included object lessons for each week of Lent – rocks, coins Easter Bags. Deacons hand-delivered these bags.
- Calling Tree of about 15-20 callers

What were the low points, failures, and frustrations?

- Biggest Curse is Biggest Blessing - Diverse Political Views
- Trying to reach a compromise, that didn’t make anyone happy. Callers did a good job keeping track of where the unrest might be.
- Healing Ministry - Reiki Team - People stopped, felt left out, so we began a monthly healing service.
- Elders without internet: Brought old tech to those without and put worship on DVD’s and mailed them/brought them to people without internet.
- Local Access Station Keeping People ENGAGED

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How did they impact your mission and ministry activities?

The mission of the Avon Congregational Church is ‘to enable people to know God’s unconditional love and to be a community of faith helping one another to live as Jesus Christ lived and taught.’ When reflecting upon the historical Jesus, we know he needed to adapt in creative ways in order to best reach people. To do this, Jesus used parable and metaphors about the day-to-day well-known experiences of his day. This allowed people to find themselves in his stories and to learn what other faith-seeking folk have done to deepen their relationship with God and each other.

Keeping this in mind, it made good sense to me to adapt the ways we approached ministry at Avon Congregational Church in order to better suit our times and the people who shared unprecedented experiences in and around the COVID-19 pandemic. How could we ensure the church remained a sanctuary in every sense of the word? In what ways could we present Good News as the light to guide our way through and beyond the dark days of pandemic?

1. Jesus’ Way of love through radical acceptance and extravagant welcome is found through the spiritual practices of compassion, forgiveness and faith-filled service.

What binds us in our human experience is our desire to be heard and known. Our Called to Care ministry is a group of about a dozen church members committed to being available for conversation and prayer. It occurred to me we needed to make sure we regularly checked in with every member and friend of the church. Dividing up the directory of all contacts we had among the Called to Care volunteers, each person called was asked how they were coping, and how they were meeting their needs—physically, mentally, and spiritually. Prayers were shared, practical needs were met, and anxieties that kept us up at night were faced head-on.

All through the pandemic and even beyond, I took also took on a practice that seemed a bit old-fashioned: calling and checking in on every parishioner and writing a personal notecard for every birthday celebrated. Whenever a pastor is unsure how the congregation is doing, it can only help to call each one and remind each one, as God does for all, that we are all loved and all held by our family of faith.

2. Jesus took the rules of the land seriously and then made sure bringing about the realm of God for all was central to his actions and superseded all.

The Steering Circle (our representative church leadership) and I met within a week of when recommendations to close swept across our nation. Like all Americans, we saw how science and representatives of our nation’s most respected health organizations were going to be politicized and that the life-saving measures we needed to enact would not always present themselves as a common understanding that all people embraced the same way.
So, in order that we could best protect the members of our congregation and all who utilized our building spaces, we adopted the policy to look at the CDC and national recommendations, to consider the advice of the newly forming SNEUCC, but to ultimately use as our guiding mandates, the rules and suggestions set forth by our most local health experts, The Farmington Valley Health District. When they said, ‘go virtual,’ we did. When they said, ‘mask up,’ we did. When they suggested ‘staff stay home and work virtually,’ we did. Yet, when the AA groups that meet regularly in our building said they already have a life-threatening disease known as alcoholism, and to not meet at all in person could mean potential certain death for some, we took that seriously. The church meetinghouse was built in 1819 to meet the needs of the entire community. The Sanctuary we are stewarding was created as God’s ‘safe house.’ Who were we to cite our potential insurance risks of being sued for someone who may contract COVID in our building as overarching justification for shutting AA out. Unlike many area church and civic centers who shuttered their buildings tight, our AA groups were given the right to consider how they might balance the extreme risks for Coronavirus contraction with their need to have accountability to each other in person in order to stay sober. We were a ‘bomb shelter’ of sorts set upon a potential minefield.

When death’s representatives came to capture and prosecute Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, his closest followers scattered to the winds. It was too dangerous. When the underbelly of racist bias and the systemic justice failures were held out in the light of day, our nation’s citizens had a choice. We could stay safe in our quarantined places of shelter or we could risk our own health to gather in solidarity. People of color in every shade of black and brown were continually being failed by our practices of racism. Some of us with lighter skin tones were aware. Many more were not.

When a local group of moms from our homogenously white community of Avon, wanting to have their children join them and show the cry for justice was not falling completely on deaf ears, they thought of the most central public face of their town and called Avon Congregational Church. The reasons not to do a rally during the pandemic were overwhelming. However, like Jesus, who never chose the easy way and with the lesson of his disciples who deserted him in his greatest need, the Moderator of the church and I chose to host a Rally of Solidarity.

It was made clear that we had great respect for the local law enforcement and first responders who protect us as their life’s vocation, day and night. It was made clear this was NOT a protest against all law enforcers. In fact, I worked with our local police department and assured safety at our rally with plain-clothed officers. We also invited the leadership of the town to say some words – words to bridge our common bonds rather than to divide.

When the option to be transformed by words
When the option to be transformed by words and people with common purpose arise, most people want in. That was true when Jesus spoke on the banks of the Galilee and nourished 5,000 with sustenance to live on. And it was true when social media and youth in our local schools got word a rally of solidarity for justice was happening in a place like Avon, CT. An estimated 600 people carrying various signs and symbols of peace gathered. We all wore masks outside. We all did our best to keep the physical distance of six feet, even though our social distance was heart to heart.

It’s not clear, even in retrospect if we did enough, but I can say without reservation, we did what we could! And that could only be true by the joined resolve of many people striving to make meaning and purpose. That could only happen when we looked to Jesus’ example - a mission and ministry to create a world God would want for all.

How did your church continue to be engaged in innovative, creative and unfamiliar ways during the COVID-19 shutdown?

We were holding in-person worship one week in early March 2020, as we have done since 1819. Once the decision was made to hold virtual services, by the next Sunday we had an I-Phone set up on a tripod strapped down to a rolling kitchen cart. This creative out-of-the-box workaround was not new to me as I come from decades of producing and directing community theater.

At the time, this was innovative and creative. Now, it’s a norm for most churches and houses of faith.
could more safely gather outside. This weekly gathering enabled people who otherwise had no interaction with anyone to be among faces, albeit at a distance, whom they loved and trusted.

On the social media side, I engaged creative people I knew. One cellist recorded a series of fun cello solos outside in all sorts of odd locals – my farmhouse or chicken coop, the front lawn of the church, a graveyard. This series, called “One a Day in May” brought out all sorts of creative ideas for a story, poem, joke, song, scripture reading etc. to lighten the heart and keep us connected.

**What were the low points, failures or frustrations?**

While it was a conscious choice, I think having weeks and then not months go by where multiple voices were not leading worship felt like a loss to me. The Body of Christ is the many and it was frustrating that we could not fulfill that espoused vision of a community for services, especially services like Maundy Thursday, Easter and Christmas Eve.

**What were the high points and successes?**

I’ve heard it takes about 21 days to make a new behavior a learned habit. While this may be helpful for creating a new workout routine for healthy living, it is not as helpful when it means people get used to staying home and not attending church.

A high point and success to celebrate is that we as a church, with the help of a well-connected staff, knew well our challenge to keep each aspect of ministry vital, relevant and in the forefront of our congregation member’s lives. It could be that because people checked in for social media posts, zoom meetings and outside opportunities for distanced meetings, they are actually MORE engaged with Avon Congregational Church than before. If we’re meeting their need, offering God’s love, and assuaging fears and anxieties, we’ve got lots to celebrate!

**Overall: What lessons, learnings or changes will your congregation carry into the future?**

We’ve embodied what it means for the church to not mean the building, but to mean God’s spirit working through and with us for God’s purposes.
How did the two pandemics (COVID-19 and Racism) impact your mission and ministry activities?

Clearly it was a wake-up call but it was a challenging time. We closed on March 14th of 2020 but tried to use humor to navigate the trauma and challenges we faced. Lay people learned YouTube, including how to record, and another gifted person put the service together. It was difficult to not be able to visit with people, but we created phone trees to check on one another.

Black Lives Matter impacted our church as well. We prayed for both victims and the police force, holding monthly vigils to raise awareness for social issues. There were 230 people at first and unfortunately some people in the community hated it. We received threats, as we were public about our position on Racial Justice in the community. But we also fostered strong partnerships with the police. Within our congregation we started to have important conversations about race, using books as a platform for discussions. We asked how we can be anti-racist and reflected on what white privilege looks like.

How did your church continue to be engaged in innovative, creative and unfamiliar ways during the COVID-19 shutdown?

We believe that mission is Outreach and had to find new ways to address both new and old challenges. The Police Chief came to talk about racism and we talked about the importance of working together. We interviewed community stakeholders to learn about their perceptions of who we are and to start conversations about how we can work together.
We started to rent out space for outside programs that had values aligning with ours. The Tree of Life Preschool came and requested space, as well as a music teacher. As of now, 3 non-profits occupy space in our building. Additionally, we have worked in partnership with four non-profits, including Food for Friends and Habitat.

Our Global Mission person adjusted a scheduled meeting and the team asked, “Could you join us on Zoom for a Coffee Hour?” It worked! The coffee hour was one way that we were able to connect.

What we have found is that when you look outside of yourself and see what the needs are, the impossible becomes possible. We have accomplished an insurmountable amount thanks to can-do people, and have learned not to sweat the small stuff.

**What were the low points, failures, or frustrations?**

One of the biggest low points was hearing repeated stories of police abuse, and the plague of racism became a leading light for the Vigils on Saturday morning. Also, we often had the feeling of being alienated and lonely while pulling together worship. It felt like it was a lonely island and we wouldn’t see each other all day. We had to work harder to find the Spirit.

**What were the high points and successes?**

High Point: Vigils, as there wasn’t any planning but the work of the Holy Spirit. Our folks aren’t done with addressing racism and our church has become more mission-oriented. The level of authenticity also changed; it wiped out a sense of grandiosity and helped support growth in humility.

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What lessons, learnings, or changes will your congregation carry into the future?

- If we stand still, we’re not moving forward.
- We don’t want to return to normal.
- We become better with digital worship services.
- If churches want to thrive, hybrid is the new normal.
- Flexibility is required
The events of 2020 were very significant and transformative. We had to shut down what we were doing and really reinvent ourselves. We found that we were actually reaching more people. Offered a Virtual Coffee hour. The challenges changed who we are and how we are: It was an “immersive discovery.” There’s a lot more to being church. Met with local teen mental health service. They were noticing an uptick in emergency calls involving youth. Church started Friday nights on the green: concerts and pizza parties in partnership with Winsted Youth Services Bureau. Sunday worship: started with pre-recorded videos released through email and Facebook just before 10am Sunday mornings. Eventually we switched to a livestream format. Formed an in-person worship task force composed mostly of nurses.

As you reflect on the 2020 pandemic, both with regard to COVID-19 and Racism:

How did these pandemics impact your mission and ministry activities?

- The events of 2020 were very significant and transformative. We had to shut down what we were doing and really reinvent ourselves.
- We found that we were actually reaching more people.
- Offered a Virtual Coffee hour.
- The challenges changed who we are and how we are: It was an “immersive discovery.”
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How did your church continue to be engaged in innovative, creative, and unfamiliar ways during the COVID-19 shutdown?

- Zoom connected people physically distant from church. We started a Thursday morning Zoom prayer group and had people participating from Israel, Nigeria, and South Carolina.
- A granddaughter of a church member led an “Understanding Judaism” class from where she was living in Israel.
- The minister of music met individually with folks to record their choir parts and then assembled “Zoom choir” pieces. We did a virtual choir for Christmas that featured a dancer and three musicians and we also created a film for Easter. The church hadn’t used video or liturgical dance in worship before COVID so this was a big change.
- We virtually featured a professor from Yale as a guest preacher, with discussion afterward.
- Race: Partnered with Rev. Dr. Shelly Best, Redeemer AME Zion, who grew up in Norfolk. We built a relationship between Norfolk Congregational and Redeemer and hosted a featured a book discussion of I Am Still Here. 10-12 members of each church participated together.
- We started a “Learning about racial injustice” group that was led by young people. They would bring a topic to the table and discuss.
- We also partnered with Salisbury School to do a history of slavery in CT program. This culminated in “Witness Stone” project memorializing James Mars, the last enslaved person in CT, who was a resident of Norfolk. His was the 50th witness stone in CT. May 21, 2021 was James Mars day, with a Commemoration attended by US and state reps; NAACP chapter president, Rev. Cleo Graham, from Faith UCC, where James Mars had served as deacon; and students from Salisbury School.
- We started a partnership with “Our Culture is Beautiful” organization based in Torrington. Collaborations featured African drumming and storytelling, as well as mobile library ministry.
- We also led rallies on the town green following the murder of Ahmed Arbury and participated in a prayer vigil at the state house. In Jan. of 2021,
worship services featured a racial justice moment in which parishioners shared their new learnings.

What were the low points, failures or frustrations?

- Loss of community. Everything was harder as far as connecting.
- We experienced some pushback from church and community members around anti-racism work.

What were the high points and successes?

- We had many successful collaborations.
- We better defined who are we as a church, though we continue to wrestle with this question. Sunday morning no longer defines us and we’ve learned to get out of the box.
- Entering into new relationships. We did the work of creating new relationships with communities of color. There’s been more movement in the last 2 years than in the previous 10. It started with Easter 2020 “delivering Easter” around the community that broke the dam.
- We worked with Shelley Best around what to do instead of Black Lives Matter sign, which kept getting stolen off church property. Made “skin-tone” Adirondack chairs for church lawn with sign “God loves every skin color and so do we.” Chairs and painting were all donated by community members. It felt “spirit led” and created an “invitational space.”

What lessons, learnings or changes will your congregation carry into the future?

- Our relationship with Redeemer AME Zion is one we will continue to cultivate.
- Our partnership with “Our Cultures are Beautiful.”
CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF MANSFIELD

For Rev. Ruth Shaver, the focus of her church work during the pandemic mostly involved maintaining a sense of community. Ruth was living in North Conway NH at the start of the pandemic and joined the Mansfield congregation in August of 2020.

In the church, Ruth became the technology person. She started a YouTube channel, had a Facebook group going strong, and worked to create a much better website. The church tried the app for music called Acapella but found that it was a little too complicated with the technology that they had at hand. This caused them to update their technology, such as buying new computers and microphones. Using this technology, the church put on a multipart digital Christmas pageant, all on re-recorded video. This was stitched together carefully by Ruth. For instance, one man did a reflection as Joseph. Then others did something similar.

Another innovation was ‘Zoom Dinner Church.’ This was a great time to replay the Christmas pageant and any other videos that they had in the files, as well as eat food together. For Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday the church was able to utilize video to do a number of skits. Also on holy humor Sunday, the Sunday after Easter, the church was able to do a ‘radio play’ on zoom this involved a biblical adventure hour.

All of the monthly church meetings were on zoom or were outside. Everything worked via email. Educational programs continued on virtually, but Ruth found that the children were burned out from watching too much zoom.

The church began worshiping outside in July of 2021 in their parking lot. The Bristol County district attorney’s office gave them a grant for an air filtration system. During the lockdown, leaders in the church kept people communicating via cards and phone calls and emails. This helped offset the isolation people were feeling. When it came time for Christmas, the children made luminaria powered by batteries and were able to deliver them and pick them up. The church was able to film the advent wreath lighting and be able to share that with people on video.

The food pantry that is housed at their church is ecumenically run even though it is on the church’s property. The church offered more space to them in light of the ever-growing need. People in the church
helped to stock shelves so people in need were able to drive through and pick up a box. They would call and then sometimes be invited to come in and shop, yet other times they could just get a box of food. The church and the food pantry tried their best to meet all of these unexpected needs in the community.

The church is now currently open to a number of groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous. Income that was missed from their fall Fair and cash donations during worship, were offset by the shutdown.

The church is shifting from a full-time model of ministry to a three-quarter time model so doing all of this now is actually going to be helpful in putting together the profile. The question ‘what have we learned?’ can be answered by ‘look at what we have done!’ There is much more interest in lay preaching on the 4th Sunday of each month, for example

Ruth has found the book entitled Part Time Is Plenty to be extremely helpful in navigating this shift of pastoral leadership. The book includes different organization models to try and the people of the church have found this very empowering. It has given them some energy and excitement in wanting to try different models of being and doing church. In terms of racial justice work, there was less happening at the church because their former pastor was leaving at the time Ruth was arriving so the people had just planned their goodbye. There was a series on racism at the end of the year, but zoom was not the best format for controversial conversations. There was talk about the black experience in children's sermons, and in other areas of church life, so the congregation did learn but not as much as they could have if there had not been a pandemic and leadership changes.

In children’s programming, people were invited to participate in different videos. This gave them all a deeper appreciation of the biblical narratives. They spent time thinking about what it is to be together in the wilderness, how they can care for each, other and how they don't let separations rule the day. The kids were very excited about this. Now they are assembling baskets for the local women’s shelter and have started other small mission projects. This includes working at the local soup kitchens, and helping pack things up at church and drop them off.

The church seats about 200 people in the sanctuary, but there are only about 40 to 70 active people in the congregation right now. When the church was on Zoom the numbers were more like 15 to 50 people. The people of the church overall have had a very good attitude and are inclined to the phrase ‘never give up!’
In terms of worship, the transition to an online format was very easy and quick. The Minister of Music at the church is incredibly tech-savvy. When the shut-down happened, he put together an eight-page proposal for how the church could move everything online. This proposal became the framework for what the church did from then on.

For worship, the church utilized Zoom. Staff were in the sanctuary initially. They soon transitioned to staff leading worship from their homes. This change was due to something the read from the conference that suggested worship from home would be better than in the sanctuary. Each week, they learned more and more of what worked and what didn’t.

The music minister had recorded eight years’ worth of music played in worship, and so was able to bring all this back from the vault to be used. This meant that all the music for worship had been performed by the people in the church. This became a guiding theme for the church; drawing upon the authentic faith expressions of the congregation. Some weeks the minister of music would layer the pre-recorded music with different voices. This would be combined with slide shows of pictures of people in the congregation they had from the past. Together, this created a sense of connection amongst the people in the worship service.

Debbie worked on creating an altar-scape in her home for her recordings and invited people on Zoom to share their special place they had set aside for worship. This use on Zoom was a great example of using technology to connect people, rather than for entertainment. This became a guiding mantra – technology is to be used here to help us connect.

One additional activity was delivering communion bread to people for world communion Sunday. This was home baked bread by someone in the congregation. Again, this was a focus on connecting people in the church.

In terms of racial justice, the church has a group of people called the ‘justice in love’ team. This is part of Open Spirit’s multi-faith group that has connection with the church as well as some overlap with people, but is an independent entity. They held three initiatives.

First, they hosted racial justice movie nights.

Secondly, they talked about the book entitled, Mindful of Race. This book is about mindfulness practice and racism. They did this for eight weeks, two hours each Monday night. 45 people came out
for this the first night. They also did some yoga and other ways to honor our emotions. This was a way to talk about racism in a way that did not create defensiveness among the participants. Throughout the entire book discussion 70 people came to the class.

The third initiative was working with Jewish Family Services, which the church had worked with before. This focused on bystander training through Quabbin Mediation’s program. They also coordinated this with the Public Library.

The church wanted to find organic contributions that they could make to the larger society. They wanted to find anti-racist approaches to giving that are part of learning in mission. This is a focus on giving to connections and relationships rather than abstract causes people who were involved in this were stakeholders made up of churches and schools and people at other institutions. They met together to make a commitment to do a certain thing. They asked how do we hold ourselves accountable as well as others? For example, how would we hire a diversity equity and inclusion person for our organization? The church listed its commitments on its website these include things such as hiring a more diverse staff, building in metrics on our goals, etc. The people on the church board are leading this initiative, and Debbie finds herself having to slow them down. They are so excited to do this work! The five leaders are spending a lot of time teaching.

Another group is called Framingham vibes. This is a community group in the larger Framingham town and there is a lot of cross-pollination with people at the church.

The church has some future goals which include continuing to work on:

Frist, mindful racism. This was initiated on zoom and was very timely but the church will not continue this in the same way because people are far too busy now. It was the right thing at the right time, but they want to explore other ways to stay engaged in anti-racism work.

Second, the bystander training that the church people went through continues to work on its own.

Third, the hybrid experience of worship being both online and in person will continue on for the future because this stays with that connection theme that they found so helpful and important.

Overall, the urgency of justice work was important as was the ability to shift to an online format that made worship more inclusive.
Over the last 18 months or so, our nation has faced two pandemics—the health pandemic of COVID-19 and the pandemic of continuous Racial Injustice. As you think about these two pandemics,

**How did they impact your mission and ministry activities?**

I attend Faith Congregational in Hartford. I have four children and my mother is also a member. We had an active life at the church; served in the choir, Girl Scout troop, and were past moderators. Our past Settled Pastor retired a month before COVID-19. In Nov. of 2020, Cleo Graham was called. We worshipped with Emmanuel Church for the first 8 months, where we shared a joint Youth Group. Most notably, confirmation class during COVID was different. We also had walk-through Communion a few times. There were a lot of transitions in the personal family, and it was hard not having church.

**How did your church continue to be engaged in innovative, creative and unfamiliar ways during the COVID-19 shutdown?**

I was involved in United Black Christians movement as a teenager. I’ve always known the church to be active in systemic racism. Social Justice action has always been a part of the movement as well. When George Filloyd was murdered, the church was not yet outside. We were online but started to offer Drive-by Communion services and had a few walk-throughs in the Sanctuary. We also hosted joint services around Amistad. We received the Faith in our Future Together grant, which is helping to get the building up and running with A/V.

**What were the low points, failures, or frustrations?**

The building is older and in need of repair. Much work needs to be done in order to get the church up and leverage the building for the wider community and expand some of the ministries we have in the community. There is a yearning to be in community for everyone, and especially the elderly. We had a Zoom-bomber on one Sunday. We lost a member of the church during COVID. He sang in the choir. That was a very sad and very hard death to embrace because we couldn’t pastor to him in his final days.

**What were the high points and successes?**

When we were able to establish our own Zoom service. After service, folks stayed on for half an hour or more for fellowship.

**What lessons, learnings or changes will your congregation carry into the future?**

I’m looking forward to us becoming more technology savvy and getting better video cameras. The option of online worship will always be available and we want to make sure we are present on social media as well. We also need to educate members regarding technology and the convenience of it. We will continue finding ways of being the church together in different affinity groups and subsets on Zoom throughout the week.
Vicki has been part of the Amherst church for 13 1/2 years, as their Pastor. This church is known as a highly progressive and activist church. So much so, that they find that faith and spirituality is their ‘growing edge.’

In early 2017, First Church Amherst began considering issues of immigration justice, and by June of that year the congregation had decided by consensus to become an "immigrant-welcoming church." At the time, church leaders were clear that they were not seeking approval to become a sanctuary church; the church’s building lacked a shower, and they were about to begin a major renovation project. Nevertheless, that September church members learned about a man facing deportation, and at an emergency congregational meeting, they chose to offer Lucio Perez sanctuary. Lucio took sanctuary in October 2017, and left sanctuary in March 2021.

When it came to worship, there was a video professional in the congregation. Vicki said, ‘you can do it for yourself for one week and then suddenly the next week you’ll be streaming live on YouTube or streaming from the Chapel with five other leaders.’ It was not fancy at all at first. Refining this took a lot of time. All of the church meetings shifted to zoom and all of the weekly interactions in the church also shifted to zoom. One of the questions that the leadership wrestled with was, ‘how do we care for each other and how do we keep connection?’ The deacons would often check in with people by phone, letter, postcard, or email. Wednesday nights became a time for resume vespers. The soup kitchen at the church continued strong and didn’t miss a meal at all. There were digital birthday parties and distanced farewells and other ways to reach out to people. A lot of concern was given to the neighbors of the church who were hurting.

One big thing the church did was that the leadership team gave away a large sum of money to area groups. The church has a governing board which is a team, and not a church council model. They gave away $27,000. 17,000 of this was for a group called Mutual Aid. They are a community network in the Holyoke and Springfield area. The reason for this choosing group was that people of color were struggling with the greatest needs in basic living expenses. The church also wanted to live out its anti-racist covenant. The other money was given to locally owned businesses that were able to set up microgrants. This came out to be about $10,000. Some people in the church had reservations about giving money to businesses but the consensus-making process of the church was very helpful. All decisions in the church are made this way. The $27,000 was from 2014 when they had a fund of money set aside to be used for either peace or justice or compassion work. They had set aside this money as part of what they raised in their capital campaign.
In 2010, the church created its covenant to be an anti-racist church. The year before, in 2009, they worked through the Sacred Conversations’ program. This was the starting point for their anti-racist stances and work. It wasn’t a controversy, but it created lots of good conversations and a lot of understanding came from it all.

Black Lives Matter was a regular presence on the town common in the form of a weekly vigil. This was not hosted by the church but many people from the church were able to participate. Anti-racist work was part of sermons and worship throughout the pandemic.

Only one member of the church died of COVID. There were a few who died alone who were loosely connected to the church. They are still not sure if they have lost members as part of this pandemic. As mentioned, faith and spirituality is the growing edge of this congregation because it has such a social justice-oriented view. Back in 1987 the church became Open and Affirming as well as a Just Peace church. They have given sermons during election time and spiritual grounding for such times. There’s a pseudo-creed in their worship service that the people see as the ‘congregational mantra.’ They often say this while lighting a candle and passing the peace. Many of the older people of the church that do not have technology skills have lost out some. Some of the elders have done okay with the new technology changes.

The church moved its leadership from boards to teams 13 years ago now they have elected leadership teams. This includes the moderator the treasurer, the clerk, etc. and all the other members are at large. They are not a representational body but a visioning body. This helps the church really live out its mission.
1. How did they impact your mission and ministry activities?

[Our Church] is in the foothills of the Berkshires. There are a lot of vibrant churches and leading edge churches that are becoming more inclusive. Demographics are still relatively white. Before the pandemic, we were engaged in siloed groups about racial injustice. The murder of G. Floyd acted as a catalyst. Then the pandemic came about... nightly vigils, weekly vigils continued, but the pandemic got in the way of us thinking beyond the vigils. This is an aging community and there’s a sense that things are on pause.

The [Faith in our Future Together] grant gave us the opportunity to reengage and think about what would come next as it stretches on. We are looking for opportunities to act now... Local ecumenical council has engaged in racial justice and there was a mix of voices between POC and white folks. A number of congregants participated. We also partnered with St. John’s in a program of “Sacred Ground.”

2. How did your church continue to be engaged in innovative, creative and unfamiliar ways during the COVID-19 shutdown?

The most pressing challenge was creating a meaningful worship service while not in the sanctuary. An opportunity to re-think how we are accessible to all, including those who were not able to come to church pre-COVID. We installed a camera and a way to record music. We have an enormous choir: 50% of regular church attenders. Used software to record voices and mix them together. We engaged younger people with the A/V as well. Separate video with a children’s message. Lots of screen-fatigue with our younger families. The Missions committee worked to expand the Pastor’s Discretionary fund to beyond its traditional uses. 500% increase in the Discretionary Fund. That has made its way out into the wider community. Stewardship video campaign – dressed in costumes – satirical skit about using Zoom for church.

3. What were the low points, failures, or frustrations?

In hindsight, the staff took on too much. Harder to keep an eye on self-care of staff while away from each other. We sometimes failed to communicate all the nuances of the new work that needed to happen in this new environment. Time has been warped in a strange way. There’s a placelessness and a timelessness to having all our meetings online and. Having to make decisions and make “asks” online.

4. What were the high points and successes?

The Stewardship Campaign was a high point and it
was a success. Finding out that the hard work for this grant was a highpoint. We established a prayer circle. Being surrounded by nature and being able to be outside with the community has been a highlight; snow shoeing, farming camp, etc. An opportunity to see nature in a new way. Hilltown Churches Food Pantry – more resources available during the pandemic. We’ve become much more connected to that mission through the church. David has joined the Board of the Pantry.

5. What lessons, learnings or changes will your congregation carry into the future?

Church should be accessible to all, whether or not you can get to the church or not. This has also made church leadership more accessible. A deeper sense of vulnerability has made us aware of how others have always been vulnerable and that it behooves us to be engaged in the conversation. It’s in our self-interest to seek justice for others.
Over the last 18 months or so, our nation has faced two pandemics—the health pandemic of COVID 19 and the pandemic of continuous Racial Injustice. As you think about these two pandemics,

**How did they impact your mission and ministry activities?**

It’s been an unfolding. Every time we think we are understanding what’s going on, it changes and extends. “Pivot, pivot, and pivot some more.” From in-person to online worship. Bible studies online. Prayer groups, which didn’t exist previously, began online.

We’ve not only maintained our missions but found new and different ways of doing them. What it means to say “Black Lives Matter” and doing what it means. We have developed a partnership with the library on a Social Justice issue of racism and trans rights. It hasn’t affected much of our mission in that the Food Pantry has been ongoing.

**How did your church continue to be engaged in innovative, creative, and unfamiliar ways during the COVID-19 shutdown?**

Sunday school pivoted to online as well. Lighting candles in the windows of the church and still lit, as a sign of love and compassion. We have done more work for Bible Studies online and incorporated a lot more videos. Screens in the worship space have enabled getting rid of bulletins and hymnals and have led to an incredible time of experimentation. It’s a direct result of COVID that a conversation has begun about moving the pews. They are actively asking the question, “what is worship?” We’ve also been investigating how to maintain connections with those who started coming to church online and have never been in the sanctuary.

What were the low points, failures, or frustrations?

Exhaustion. The negative and positive is “pivoting, pivoting, pivoting,” and learning how much you could do. There was only myself to learn the A/V and get it ready for Sunday.

Financial support from outreach efforts that were lost was a struggle. The folk of the church came through and supported the church in new ways. The last couple of months have been difficult on folks and there is a general sense of COVID exhaustion.

Pastoral care was affected by not being able to be in hospitals. The Council was given Call Logs to call
groups of 10 people throughout the pandemic. Families also had to deal with delayed services for their loved ones.

What were the high points and successes?

The pandemic gave us a reminder of what church is. Church is not the building. We were reminded of the movement of the spirit, and that is true for both pandemics. We can get caught up in the day-to-day busyness, and this gave us an opportunity to focus on these two pandemics. It’s caused people to think about ‘what is life?’ What do I want life to be? What is life being filled with? What is important and what is not?

What lessons, learnings or changes will your congregation carry into the future?

It’s not over. “Health has become of greater importance to me.” Lessons of the pandemic will be rolling out for years to come. But we’ve learned to recognize what’s important and have practiced slowing down a little bit. We are also honoring the importance of being literally present to one another while accepting the “creative” spirit of change. There is a hope that we continue to be willing to bend. “Something in this time period has invited people to see people as people;” to see the other as brother. It’s made the church become more aware of how others live, daily.
January 2021 stepped into a local church. The church invested money into recording worship. Easter was approaching. Not at Easter, but soon after we started livestreaming worship. Learning how to do everything. Recording sermon on Thursday; preaching to sanctuary crowd. New people only showing up online. Readjusting thinking. How to preach to 4 different “congregations” at the same time. How do we take what we used to do on a Sunday morning and transition it to online?

Most of the time on Churchwide staff - encouraged congregations to get out to the church into the world.

The community of Randolph - the most diverse in MA. Our congregation has a level of diversity, but it has been primarily white.

The church is adapting to the changes around it. The question for the future - how do we minister to this community? Also adapt to the changes in society?

Identity development opportunity for the church during this time. COVID created instability and it has helped us look at how we do ministry and how we tackle racism.

The church invested about $30,000 in tech equipment in the fall of 2020. The church continued to adapt and innovate how to create worship experiences.

The leadership wants to keep asking this question....How do we create a worship experience that is engaging for members and visitors - live in person and online that is impactful and faithful to God?

How do we talk with visitors to see what is most impactful and faithful?

What were the low points, failures or frustrations?

Technology is wonderful when it works but it is discouraging when it doesn’t work. We had continual glitches on Sunday mornings. We have a vision of what we want to do but sometimes the tech doesn’t work.

Low and High point - when we want to address race in the congregation. Some people are excited about it and want to talk about it. Others say we are “preaching politics.” We have asked ourselves, "how do we do this so that it can be engaging and
includes everyone?"

**What were the high points and successes?**

Successes - that the tech we are using helps us reach people. We are seeing regular members showing up online, as well as people that are not members. We can say this is working, but how are we going to make this work more effectively?

**What lessons, learnings or changes will your congregation carry into the future?**

The jury is still out - but the lesson learned is worship can be done differently than with we have done before, and the impact that we can have beyond our walls is great. Through live-streaming and using some of the equipment for other types of ministry we are engaging the world in a different way. There is an attitude of "we can do this" and there is permission and curiosity. There is clear missional passion in the congregation, which will help us become a better church in the future.

Lesson learned on the racism side - We are a primarily white church in a diverse community. One lesson learning is - how do we get out into our neighborhood and get to know people and bring them not only into the church but into the leadership of the church? We can't solve social issues from inside the church. We need to get engaged in the community. We don't just have programs in the community but instead get out there and engage in the community.
We formed a Racial Justice Team in February 2020. We worked with New York advisors who asked, “What would we look like in 2030 if we lived out our racial justice commitments?” Some of our racial justice attention focused on the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe on Cape Cod but the George Floyd murder really increased efforts and concerns. The church Council asked “should this team have a council representative?” We ended up going from a team to the Justice Board so that every activity would flow through a justice perspective.

Our congregation was concerned with food equity. We continued hosting community supper and developed a take-out and delivery system. Thankfully we received a grant to provide a stipend for 2 volunteer leaders because coordination required so much more time.

We started launching zoom teach-in services for 120 households beginning March/April.

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How did your church continue to be engaged in innovative, creative, and unfamiliar ways during the COVID-19 shutdown?

- Using Zoom creatively was interesting. We utilized Sanctified Art so members could look at beautiful artwork instead of just reading words during parts of service. Deacons gathered prayer requests in the chat and included the requests in the prayers.
- Terrible music quality required patience and kindness. We worked with “Power Sound” and purchased 2 projectors, 2 cameras, and new mikes, in order to live stream in higher quality. The livestream quality improved tremendously, and we continued to stream the service even as people returned to in-person service with masks.
- We invited special guest preachers.
- Creative bubble

What were the low points, failures, or frustrations?

- Constant Tech Failures at the beginning were very challenging.
- Children and Youth Programming stopped. It was very difficult to engage families with young children. The majority of families were NOT doing Zoom worship.
A lot of the church efforts have been cutting edge, and it has been challenging but rewarding to work through the hard stuff. We began to look at systems through the lens of Racial Justice. We have refined Hybrid Worship and have found ways to access the strengths of both remote and in-person worship. Staffing Moves were needed. Feeding the Community was something we celebrated.

Lessons: Resiliency – We have learned that we are adaptable and that we can cope with changes. We have learned more about what we are able to do together. We have come to a point of understanding that our church is bigger than the building. Outdoor Worship – Our Worship without Walls on Wednesdays in Summer was a great addition to our service schedule. We were able to muscle through so much while paying attention to self-care.

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Food equity remained a focus and we stepped up our community support, developing take-out and delivery systems to meet community needs. Thankfully, we received a grant to offer a stipend to 2 volunteer leaders because coordination required so much more time.

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- We managed to use Zoom creatively, which was an interesting experience.

- The music quality on zoom at first was terrible, and we required patience and kindness. After some time we worked with “Power Sound” and purchased: 2 projectors, 2 cameras, and new mics to livestream services through Power Sound New England’s link.

- For the 1st 3 or 4 months we offered centering-type meditations

- There was a creative bubble and we also utilized sanctified art in service delivery. This was a visual feast for the eyes and church attendees could look at beautiful artwork instead of just looking at words. This is something we have continued to offer.

- We had special guest preachers join us.

- We quickly transitioned to a Hybrid format because we were able to offer different ways for church members to join us for worship: Zoom, In-Person, and Watch Later. To help the services feel more integrated we projected the live gallery onto the wall during the passing of the peace.
and during prayers. Additionally, deacons gathered prayer requests in the chat and included the requests in the prayers. It took some time to smooth out the hybrid model and required patience and compassion.

We discussed reframing the “Behavioral Covenant” to include issues of equity and belonging.

Constant Tech Failures became a source of frustration for everyone.

At some points we questioned if the cost of our investment into Hybrid worship was worth it.

Concern about the ability of lay leaders to cope with the pastors’ sabbatical.

Children and Youth Programming stopped and families were not doing Zoom services. Losing that connection to children and families was a tremendous loss.

Unresolved “1619” issues re: Old conflicts and working to include new programs to support this Multi-Racial Community.

What were the high points and successes?

- We pioneered cutting edge systems and worked through the hard stuff.
- Our church began to look at systems through the lens of Racial Justice.
- Hybrid Worship offered new opportunities for us to carry over into the future.
- Staffing moves were challenging during this time.

What lessons, learnings, or changes will your congregation carry into the future?

- We learned about our own resiliency and found that our church is adaptable. What we were able to do together was much bigger than the building.
- Outdoor Worship – Worship without Walls on Wednesdays in Summer.
- We were able to muscle through so much while paying attention to self-care.
WE had to ask ourselves the question, "how can we all thrive together?"
We developed 4 separate budgets within the church to address that we had identified as important. We had separate budgets for operating funds, reparations, COVID-19, and a flower fund for people in the hospital.
We explored reparations with BU University but in 2020 White Supremacy had already begun to unravel. During the COVID pandemic, families of color were the first to be hit by COVID-19. We explored race and economic factors and looked at differences in equity. We started work to offer reparations to those who have ancestors who were slaves. Questions emerged about how we could discern who should receive funds.
Children immediately disappeared.
COVID-19 Fund: Established a shared fund to distribute. Given away $8,000 in Grants.

How did your church continue to be engaged in innovative, creative and unfamiliar ways during the COVID-19 shutdowns?

- During 2020, everything changed. We were called to question how we worship, how we care, how we connect, and how we live in a world where white supremacy asks us to be certain and safe when certain and safe are never our reality.
- We used our remote service to tell stories, including "Story Slams" on Zoom.
- We offered Sunday School on Zoom. We had a lot attending at the beginning of the Pandemic. Once people got used to it, attendance fell off.
- Mantra: We don’t know who we are, and we don’t know what we are doing.
- Because of Zoom, we’ve gained people across the country.

What were the low points, failures, or frustrations?

- There were all kinds of trauma, and the pandemic triggered old traumas as well. Everyone experienced a degree of "languishing." Many were stuck worrying and depressed.
- Just when we thought the plague was lifting, the Delta variant arrived and we were crushed.
COVID-19 Relief Fund elevated spirits
Our work with Reparations felt real. It was something clear, substantive, and meaningful.
Musicians joined us and created out of the Center of Their Souls.
Our Moderators have made wise decisions, asking for wisdom and turning it around for the worship life together.
Our relationship with Gay/Lesbian/Black Culture During Trump’s presidency.
Receiving a $50,000 Grant helped us to do important work.

What were the high points and successes?

- We have continued to appreciate that the only thing sacred is God, and our practices are to feed that faith.
- We are continuing to offer meetings on zoom.
- We have learned that the work of reparations IS possible
- We have come to understand that Inclusion and Equity are not the same things.
- We have learned that people can participate without being together in person
- “We’re falling back into our faith.” Doing it across a whole lot of differences.

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- “We’re falling back into our faith.” Doing it across a whole lot of differences.
COVID shifted all programming online. The leadership decided not to gather in person for a year, given the uncertainties we all felt. Instead, we invested time and energy in innovating and doing things.

For the first few Sundays we did Facebook Live to offer services, but eventually we moved to prerecording worship services, involving congregational members and musicians. We continued to use zoom for programs and ministries, including our knitting group.

Over time, we started to experiment with musicians - Live on Facebook and YouTube. We asked ourselves "how do we maintain ministry when not gathered in person?"

Zoom Coffee Hour - We reflected on how it was unlike any previous experience. We were spending an hour or more intentionally with one another - supporting and loving online another. We were deepening connections without being in the same place.

How did your church continue to be engaged in innovative, creative, and unfamiliar ways during the COVID-19 shutdown?

- It was impactful to have people sitting with one another that they normally wouldn’t see, and watching them build new relationships.
- In addition to taking all ministries online, we did a few workshops to see what it would look like to be an online church. Trying out different online offerings gave us insight to what ministries will continue online.
- For our Racial Justice book discussion, we had people from Hilton Head and Canada. Having such a range of backgrounds coming together at the table was special.
- During our 90 day Bible reading study, we had people from 21 different states, Canada, and the UK.
- We were able to expand members of the faith community.
- We found new ways of getting people involved, such as accessing Tik Tok. With support from our church community, we were able to promote live stream worship services on Tik Tok, as well as through Facebook, and YouTube. We also did Press releases locally to reach the greatest number of people.

How did they impact your mission and ministry activities?

- COVID shifted all programming online. The leadership decided not to gather in person for a year, given the uncertainties we all felt. Instead, we invested time and energy in innovating and doing things.
- For the first few Sundays we did Facebook Live to offer services, but eventually we moved to prerecording worship services, involving congregational members and musicians. We continued to use zoom for programs and ministries, including our knitting group.
- Over time, we started to experiment with musicians - Live on Facebook and YouTube.
- We asked ourselves "how do we maintain ministry when not gathered in person?"
- Zoom Coffee Hour - We reflected on how it was unlike any previous experience. We were spending an hour or more intentionally with one another - supporting and loving online another. We were deepening connections without being in the same place.
What were the low points, failures or frustrations?

- At some points we were lamenting and felt discouraged.
- Some church members did not have access to remote communication. We tried to stay connected with everyone but it was challenging.
- Emotionally, there was a low point of grief that we carried for over 18 months.
- We lost some people who died during the pandemic. What made it most difficult was that the community could not grieve or come together.
- There were many lost opportunities to be in each other’s lives.

What were the high points and successes?

- Just prior to the pandemic we started having book discussions. We took our discussions online, getting more people involved. These discussions started a Racial Equity team, with one member in Hilton Head.
- We started a community scholarship.
- We found that online services brought with it a wider spectrum of folks.

What lessons, learnings or changes will your congregation carry into the future?

- Everything has been a lesson for us.
- We are not the church we were.
- The language of the online church is a part of who we are now.
- We continue looking for ways to provide access to folks.
- We recognize that we seek radical hospitality. We also can’t shut down the online experience now that we’ve begun it.
- We will continue to use zoom. It is an easy way for our church to come together for things and is a way for us to worship with other congregations.
- We scheduled times that people normally wouldn’t have participated during.
- We are at a stage now where folks are recognizing that we are not a faith community that is drawn together in a physical space. We have begun to see ourselves as an online church. This brings us to some new questions, like how we navigate membership in the future.
- The work we have done will continue.
- We have developed partnerships with others and have served as a resource for other congregations. We recognize that we can work together.
- There is an element of excitement and possibilities have enabled us to continue to carry on. It's sad that it took a pandemic for this to happen to churches. But we're glad that churches are taking the next step.
- There is a great emergence that we are in the midst of right now.
We are an all-white church in a very white town. We addressed race through consciousness raising, including a Book Group on White Picket Fences. We used our church signboard and Instagram to get messages on race to the community. Folks would stop by and photograph our church sign and we got 204 followers on Instagram. As a church we attended a program on race at Greenwich Public Library. There were 12 church members. People are at the "end of the end" but I have approached ministry as “church restart.”

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- There were 12 church members. People are at the "end of the end" but I have approached ministry as “church restart.”
- We shut down in-person services in March of 2020 and switched to Zoom worship. COVID served as an “accidental interim minister” because it forced radical changes.
- Worship became very intimate. There was a different feeling when members of the congregation were seeing each other’s faces during worship instead of the backs of their heads.
- We changed pastoral prayer liturgy so each person raised their prayer and prayed it in their own words, ending with “Lord, hear our prayer.” No passing the plate for offering.
- There was lots of deferred maintenance on the building. Instead of working through trustees committee, we simply asked people who were willing to take on projects, such as painting the exterior, cleaning up landscaping, etc.

How did they impact your mission and ministry activities?

- How did your church continue to be engaged in innovative, creative, and unfamiliar ways during the COVID-19 shutdown?

- We offered a Quarantine Cafe weekly Zoom meeting on Wednesday evenings on a variety of topics: earth day, what is your favorite Scripture, bring a joke, “creativity cafe”, and bring something you made. This helped people to connect more personally with one another.
- We scheduled church members to do pastoral care for each other: phone check-ins, cookie delivery, etc.
We used the church’s commercial kitchen to cook meals for Pivot Ministries in Bridgeport and Pacific House (Stamford).

We gave away 600 children’s books and nursery school furniture left in church from their now closed nursery school.

We gave produce from organic garden on church property to a local food bank.

We donated space in church hall to Neighbor to Neighbor food assistance program.

One neighbor volunteered to fix up the church cemetery. He brought in a mason crew free of charge to reset fallen down headstones.

A church musician did monthly outdoor concerts that drew 30-35 per show. He also brought in his professional musician friends to do concerts. Donations at concerts covered 90% of the costs.

We got ideas for further community engagement at Audubon preserve across from church.

What were the low points, failures or frustrations?

People were reluctant to share their COVID diagnosis. It is a very “private” congregation.

What lessons, learnings, or changes will your congregation carry into the future?

Keeping the “Lord, hear our prayer” pastoral prayer liturgy.

No more passing the plate for the offering.

The church has a role for people who may not come on Sunday mornings.

People can be community without being on the church rolls.
PILGRIM CHURCH

During 2020, our nation faced two pandemics—the health pandemic of COVID 19 and the pandemic of continuous Racial Injustice. As you think about these two pandemics:

How did they impact your mission and ministry activities?

- COVID - Totally changed everything in ministry because we were not able to gather together in a physical way. It forced us to redefine what “together” means and we had to adapt on how we came together as a community.
- The church pivoted so fast and so well. Within 3 days we had a camera up and we were streaming through Facebook LIVE, which is something we hadn't really done before.
- We were able to offer adult education through Zoom and were able to schedule more classes and get more participation. We also offered classes on writing, including writing about your life.
- We had to check in with people on a regular basis.
- We had to try to put a spiritual spin on what we were experiencing.
- Forming Faith gathering allowed us to look at COVID changes

- Racial Justice became an important topic. We have a sister church - Bethal African Methodist church - that we have been connected to for over 30 years. During COVID, the relationship of the pastors at the churches grew. We decided in the midst of the pandemic to have an arts response to the death of George Floyd. 400 people gathered on the front lawn of the church and a hired videographer and artist made a movie about the churches’ relationship.
- To engage our congregation in discussions about race we ran a book discussion group on Me and White Supremacy, which lasted for 8 Weeks. We recognized that some people may be uncomfortable, but the way the world is at right now people don’t want to speak up. Most people know that we are privileged as a church and community, and with the death of George Floyd we have started to go deep and fast with one another. To tell the truth with one another in love.
- One of the advantages from being separated was that there was not as much conflict from everyone. People are not talking at coffee hour or during parking lot conversations.

How did your church continue to be engaged in innovative, creative and unfamiliar ways during the COVID-19 shutdown?
We have been able to offer more Adult Education.
We had 3 all church surveys to see where people were at.
We used Streaming worship live on Facebook and Youtube.
We posted "Keeping the Faith" video on Fridays as a way to connect to people during week.
We started to operate an outside Youth Group.
Our Meal Packing program put together 30,000 meals, following socially distanced meal preparation procedures.
We created videos for each week in worship.
Doing prerecorded worship gave us an opportunity to be creative.

What were the low points, failures, or frustrations?

- At first, everyone was excited to come together online on Facebook. At one point we had 110 screens, but that number started to drop down.
- Leadership cut back on staff hours and budget.
- Emerging variants made it hard to plan ahead.

What were the high points and successes?

- Our Racial Justice work and joint classes with Bethel AME were a big success.
- Having 400 People for the Racial Justice Vigil
- We had good and constant participation in Education.
- We were really able to stay connected with our congregation.
- What lessons, learnings or changes will your congregation carry into the future?
- The health and wellbeing of the people in the pews is the most important thing.
- The church is not a building — the more we put time and energy into the building - ministry will not work. But we should put time and energy in connecting our people with one another through education, worship, and fellowship.
The Ridgebury Congregational Church owns about 5 1/2 acres, located right at the crossroads in town. This is a historic site dating back to the 1740s. This is the date of the church’s meeting house. There have been innovations through the years and times of extended decline. The crossroads provides a model and metaphor for the life of the church which has to do with independence versus interdependence. The land is ours, but we are shepherding and stewarding God’s resources. This church at the crossroads is between Ridgefield and Danbury. Ridgefield is known to be a very wealthy community while Danbury is not.

The theme and motif of ‘movement ecology’ focuses their work on different levels. This has to do with self, with community, and with systems. We can’t give what we don’t have. The mystical path is a lot like intentional change in our leadership conversations we are having these days. The hope is to create an alternative community that will lead to a new ‘gathering house’ that works on many levels. This includes as a place for public assembly, a schoolhouse, a place in town for government elections, as well as a place for public worship.

In the town, there is a Conservation Commission and a Wetlands Commission. Diana Butler Bass has a book entitled ‘Grounded’ that has been very helpful to the church in exploring these themes. The church could find a gift in letting go – letting go of the heresy of the urgent or constant busyness, etc. During the pandemic the church has created much more open space as a way of honoring their history and location. Forums, food, and well-being has been the main themes. There are even plans for hydroponic gardens. This all has to do with interdependence. The environment and social justice concerns are seen as one in this congregation. The poet works on a narrative level and the prophet helps us remember who we are. These are just two sides of the same thing. One question we have wrestled with is, ‘how do we be sustainable while also being innovative?’

This church is in decline. They were in a four-year transition before Debbie arrived. There is a video on their website entitled Ruby’s Little Pantry that explains a little of this. The church has taken fences down literally and removed invasive species. There are now plans for yoga classes and farm-to-food meals, as well as hydroponics.

When it comes to racism, the church asked, ‘how do we press outward and also weave inward?’ They had a planned pilgrimage that was cancelled due to
COVID. They are asking, ‘what does it mean to unmask? how do we be beloved community? what does it mean for us to be poetic and prophetic? These three topics are coming up in the future for further conversation.

Anti-racism work can't be built out of something that is ‘anti.’ Affirming and inclusion mean you have to acknowledge that is being denied. Weaving is what helps as this is a reconciling force. Just like Lyle Schaller said, ‘all change is loss.’ So how does the church grieve well? What is the resurrection narrative all about? This church has been going through some of the stages of dying that Elizabeth Kubler Ross had pointed out. We are also reflecting on Paul’s passages of metamorphosis about what it is to take new form.

For worship we are having music on the lawn. We are also having an artist reception indoors. Only worship teams are inside. There will be a candle blessing at the front step on Sunday nights and people can see the decorated space inside the sanctuary. At 7:00 PM the church rings their bell for essential workers. Everyone in the neighborhood has really appreciated this and they came out and wanted to ask if they could help. The church invited the neighbors to bring their own bells over and ring these bells too. This helped let the people of the church know that people can bring their own bells to ring and join.

Currently, there are 52 members in the church and Debbie is only working half-time. They know that money follows mission and that no longer should they focus on the ABCs of attendance, buildings, and cash but on the DEF of discipleship, equipping, and formation.
During 2020, our nation faced two pandemics—the health pandemic of COVID 19 and the pandemic of continuous Racial Injustice. As you think about these two pandemics:

**How did the two pandemics impact your mission and ministry activities?**

The pandemic definitely impacted everything. We had to be creatively adaptable in order to allow the Mission to be Live:

- Developed an amazing trust in each other.
- Food Pantry stayed active
- With regard to Racial Justice, the Outreach team lead a book discussion and Windham Area Interfaith Ministries (WAIM) offered Zoom meetings on Racial Injustice, which we participated in. The Just Peace Social Justice team has grown, is even more active, and includes UCONN students
- on YouTube. This transition was made possible by our Organist and small Tech Team.
- We created a PowerPoint instead of a Bulletin
- We incorporated music, using SophsitizedMusical.com. We had rehearsals, but they were physically distanced.
- We were able to maintain connections with one another through a "Caring Ministry" that offered rides and meals. The Caring Connections program engaged 30-40 people, who made phone calls and sent notes to members of the congregation, and later made home visits once it was safe to do so. We ensured that some connection was made every 2 weeks.
- We recorded lessons and carols during the holiday season, even using a drone for video.
- We offered different programs to connect with people, including Bible Study on Wednesday mornings, Wednesday Evening in the Vespers, Tea Time, and Zoom Lunchtime visits.

**What were the low points, failures, or frustrations?**

- We wanted to be adaptable and we also wanted to be safe. We resumed in person gradually and had strict guidelines, including a mask requirement. We required people to sit in family groups every other pew.
For music, we really made an effort. Our Caring Ministry – Caring Connectors program was a success.

What were the high points and successes?

- They could get through challenges
- The Church is resilient
- They truly loved one another
- They empowered leadership to do their work without an overreliance on the Pastor

What lessons, learnings, or changes will your congregation carry into the future?

The previous pastor, who served there for ten years, left in the December before the pandemic. They learned:

- They could get through challenges
- The Church is resilient
- They truly loved one another
- They empowered leadership to do their work without an overreliance on the Pastor
During 2020, our nation faced two pandemics—the health pandemic of COVID-19 and the pandemic of continuous Racial Injustice. As you think about these two pandemics,

How did they impact your mission and ministry activities?

Our church, for the first time, has decided to go out on a limb and call me to ¾ time ministry. In the summer of 2020, the church was involved in the Black Lives Matter movement by being involved in rallies. We also applied one of the Faith and Our Future grants. We created an outdoor worship and education space for both services and anti-racism trainings. An indigenous speaker will come to speak and a speaker from the Cape Ann Slavery project will be coming to speak.

Local musicians were coming in to provide the music for worship during COVID. This grew viewership tremendously, provided one person to become their Minister of Music. We now have nine kids coming to church as a result of this new Music Ministry.


How did your church continue to be engaged in innovative, creative and unfamiliar ways during the COVID-19 shutdown?

- We started to have monthly drives with Pastor Rona’s pickup truck; pet food drive, food drive, toiletries, etc. We put this tiny church on the map by engaging in the community.

What were the low points, failures, or frustrations?

- It was really hard to do pastoral care throughout the pandemic. Technology was a huge struggle because the church was tiny and no one had the skills to do it. Fundraising had to take on a different shape. No bean suppers, etc.

What were the high points and successes?

- Throwing out the boring music and getting someone fabulous. Getting outside and meeting the neighbors. Being creative. No one can ever say “we’ve never done it this way before,” or “we’ve always done it this way.” They had to be brave and they were. They had no choice.

What lessons, learnings or changes will your congregation carry into the future?

- The pandemic has shown us that the church has a lot to offer the community. Before the pandemic, all we did was eat and worship. Now, we engage with the community in so many different ways.