

Stories from Our Time of Pandemic

On Friday, March 13, as I did every Friday, I walked through the church to set out the bulletins for Sunday's service and wrote in the church register the services that would be happening over the weekend. I sent out the Weekly Happenings newsletter telling people all the Lenten events that would be coming up. By Friday afternoon, it was becoming clear that it would be pretty risky to meet for Sunday's service with the Covid-19 disease having been declared a pandemic earlier that week and making its first appearance in the Milwaukee area, and on Saturday Fr. Burch and senior warden Kathy Katter decided that we would not meet in the church on Sunday morning after all. On Saturday afternoon, Fr. Burch and I met at church standing in the Parish Hall very far apart discussing how we'd revamp services for the next day. And the bulletins that I had set out on Friday morning would sit in the ready position in the sanctuary for months.

Since March 15, 2020, St. Mark's has met remotely for worship. We decided to collect stories of the experiences of members to document what our lives, most especially pertaining to our church lives, have been like during this time.

Sara Bitner, parish administrator

Susan Rohde

Our sheltering in place began with the two of us in March 2020. In mid-May, we were joined by our daughter and two grandsons, who moved into our four-bedroom house with us. On September 4, 2020, we moved to a ground floor flat a mile away from our house; and Emily, Erik, and Leif continue to live there. So our experience was complicated by a major downsizing from eight rooms and two bathrooms to five rooms and one bathroom.

Before they moved in with us, Leif was hospitalized at Children's, but a Covid test was negative. Steve had a scare in April, when he became ill and was tested for Covid. We waited eight days for the negative result. We feel blessed to have escaped infection.

We've worn masks on our few trips to the doctor, the pharmacy, and (for me) the grocery store. We've learned to entertain one or two friends by sitting, socially distanced, around an outdoor fire pit. I was unable to visit the hospice patient I met through volunteering for Horizon Hospice and was notified of her death in late April. I grieved being forced to break my promise to be with her at her deathbed. The customary Rohde Thanksgiving and Christmas parties with 18 to 20 relatives didn't occur.

Social media became more important as the sense of isolation grew. We gladly join fellow St. Mark's members, visitors, and guests for Zoom worship nearly every Sunday morning. We were delighted when two infants joined our church family. We were moved by the beautiful Advent walkthroughs on Sunday evenings and Christmas Eve.

On our own, Steve and I have found solace in saying the office of Compline Monday through Saturday, just before bed.

We miss all of our St. Mark's family and can't wait to be able to worship in a pew with you, hug you, and enjoy the wonderful St. Mark's coffee hours!

Mary Beth Alvarez



In July, I got the opportunity as a foster mom to bring home a preemie newborn from the hospital and the St. Mark's Community leaped into action. I got the full New Mom treatment with meals, baby clothes and toys and even someone to save my garden from neglect. Most importantly, I was lifted up in prayer which was such needed comfort during those first long nights. Though COVID has kept our church family from hugging and kissing sweet Zoe, I know she is loved, I hope to have a baptism as soon as we clear the hurdles for adoption and return to safe gathering.

Katherine Katter

There's an unexpected aspect of this long season of the COVID pandemic; I find myself more frequently and more deeply connected to the whole range of our communal life. As Senior Warden, I've felt a gentle sense of duty to be present at many (most) of the online services and events that we offer.

The strange intimacy of Zoom is an important anchor to this community.

I've been on Morning Prayer, all but a handful of days. That small community has reached across the continent to include me, even when I ventured to Washington state to comfort my father after my mother's death this past August. And it's connected us with a lovely couple in Florida and with Ian's mother in Arizona.

It's noteworthy that our Zoom Vestry meetings have had nearly perfect attendance. Chat features allow for comments - humorous private asides and general clarification.

I found myself running the Women's Book Club meetings on Zoom. We even upped the frequency of our meetings. What better to do during a pandemic than read? (Though many of us noted that it can be hard some days to muster the focus to read.)

I think we will come through this pandemic with a new sense of priorities and certainly with new options for "gathering" as a community.

As I write, the pandemic is in crescendo. I pray for our members to be cautious, so we can once again sing and have communion and coffee hour and even in-person meetings. And a real passing of the Peace.

Heather Barker

Graduating from U.W.M. in the spring of 2020 with a master's in music looked very different than I thought. I had to learn how to learn how to teach students and finish my classes, lessons, and recital in completely revolutionized ways online. But the creatively maintained community of St. Mark's at this time helped me feel connected in Morning

Prayer, and also gave be beautiful examples of how to use my Zoom account more effectively to connect and teach in my own work.



After a long day of teaching back in May, I changed into pajamas, poured myself a glass of wine, and checked my emails where I saw a St. Mark's post for "Apocalypse Happy Hour." Promptly, I logged on to find friends and faces ready to accept me in my PJ's, and encouragement for each of us to continue in each of our various challenges. We renamed our Zoom handles after the beverages we were drinking — just like Angler's Rest stories by P.G. Wodehouse, which I had read growing up — and I felt more loved and connected than I had since the shut down in March.

Even when I do not log onto the daily Zoom meetings, I know St. Marks is there. And particularly in this past year of massive change (globally and personally), the knowledge that St. Mark's is consistently there has helped me get through these uncertain times.



It has also been helpful to participate in virtual choirs, and record a couple times in the sanctuary — staying a part of a musical community as well. So thank you to all the faces I see on zoom. I hope to see you truly face to face someday soon, and in the meantime thank you for the example you give to me as I try to keep my students practicing music, community, and consistency.

Ellie Mixter-Keller

I have really enjoyed seeing the faces of our parish community every Sunday. In some ways, the service seems more intimate, the virtual coffee hours certainly have been. We were sent into groups to speak with people we may not have gotten to know in a larger group. The smaller groups allow for people to be more vulnerable with each other and receive support — even if we cannot see each other in real life.

As always, the liturgy has been supportive, music uplifting, floral displays beautiful and preaching seems to always be just what I need to keep the faith.

Thank you to all who pivoted so quickly and helped others to get connected through online church. Feeling blessed.

That being said, I have watched every Hallmark movie known to man and chafe at social isolation as the weather closed in. Miss you all.

Marilyn McKnight

Church in a Year of Pandemic

So many things go on and on and on...

9:30 – Sunday Service was always inside the church where the red doors welcome.

4:00 – Bible Study was always inside the church where the red doors welcome.

6:00 – Wednesday Service was always inside the chapel inside the church where the red doors welcome.

10:30 – Happy Hour was always inside the Parish Hall inside the church where the red doors welcome.

11:00 – Adult Learning was always inside the Library inside the church where the red doors welcome.

There was warmth and security and friends and family inside the church where the red doors welcome.

The SUDDENLY stop
and start
and stop
and start and...

SUDDENLY our lives can't go on and on and on inside the church where the red doors welcome

But the numbers seem the same:

There's 9:00

There's 4:00

There's 6:00

There's 10:30

There's 11:00

Suddenly there are even more numbers:

There's 9:00 – Every day, every day, every day.

There's 5:00 – Apocalyptic Happy Hour (Oh, how can that be?)

There's 6:00 – There are books and books and more books.

There's 7:00 – Movies – some known, some unknown, but always we are challenged.

Another 7:00 – To finish the week, new to some, but gentle and calm.

But how can this be?

Where is the Priest?

Where is the altar?

Where is the organ and

Where are the wonderful singers?

Where are my friends, my family, all of the families?

They are strangely not inside the church where the red doors welcome.

I am no longer inside the church where the red doors welcome.

We are all somewhere else...

We are each inside a space inside a box they call a computer and

We are all inside an entirely new world called

ZOOM!

The old numbers still exist from day to day to day,

But there are new numbers ...

ZOOM numbers!

Fancy entry numbers and

Secret password numbers and symbols that will admit us to this strange new world .

And, dear everyone, we all do know that even though we may be inside a small space inside our computer inside our home that we are all, in a very special way, still inside the church where the red doors welcome.

We will always be welcome inside the church where the red doors welcome!

Amy Farkas

While the traditional First Communion has gone by the wayside in the Episcopal Church, the first time a child takes communion still remains a significant event in a lifetime of faith. Emory's first communion took place around our kitchen table during Advent. Leading up to the event Emory kept asking if he could have wine and when we would explain that kids do not drink wine Ellie, his older sister, would respond "I can have wine at church." This led to great interest in church and communion. While we did our best to explain the difference between wine and communion, to Emory church now meant he could try wine. When it finally came time for Emory to have communion, he was very excited. We said our prayers and ate our Jesus cook and took our Jesus sip. Emory's verdict was "delicious." He now looks forward to returning in person to worship if for nothing else then his weekly sip of wine.





Barbara Wuest

At the end of January 2020, after much careful discernment, I realized that it was time to leave the church I'd been affiliated with for many years. My search for a new worshipping community began and ended at St. Mark's. It didn't take long to realize that I need look no further. I started by participating in the Sunday worship services. On my second Sunday there, I was so sure that this was the place for me that I filled out a welcome card. This was near the end of February 2020, which is when I received an email from Fr. Burch welcoming me to the parish. My plan was to participate in the services through the 2020 Lent and Easter season. I thought that by then I would be able to make a formal commitment and join the St. Mark's community officially.

It seemed that I couldn't have chosen a worse time to begin exploring a new church. I had barely begun to get acquainted when everything was halted due to the pandemic. For a time, I felt like I was in limbo church-wise. However, it didn't take long for St. Mark's to get set up for continuing services remotely. As strange as it has been to attend services online, I am getting used to it. The homilies are still as inspiring and challenging as they were at the two in-person services that I attended before the pandemic. Prayers are said with the same level of devotion. The musical offerings are as beautifully sung and played.

But we can't shake hands. When I was at those two in-person services, people I didn't know came up to me and shook my hand and welcomed me. I was amazed at how at ease I felt, at ease enough to be open to the liturgy as if experiencing its depths for the first time. At each of those two services, I worked to hold back tears, tears of joy that I can't help but think had been quietly transmitted to me from the generous people around me. Like everyone, I look forward to getting back to in-person worship. Meanwhile, I am truly grateful that, despite the limitations the pandemic imposes, St. Mark's remains a vibrant and prayerful community that I hope to get to know better once we resume seeing each other face to face without the barriers of our computer screens.

Janet Martin

I am in the wilderness — a wilderness in which trust has disappeared. I did not realize that there were so many millions of people who hide behind white supremacy for their protection. Covid-19 has forced us into an isolation that denies our community. I was on the right track reading black history and advocating for racial justice. I am brought up short by a couple of crooks who wiped my bank account clean. (Do not trust anyone in trouble on the phone). The election shocked me into realizing what black voters had been experiencing for 150 years. And the pandemic laid bare our national contempt for people of color, people who are poor, people with little education, people with a record, old people. I need — perhaps we all need our community back so we can rebuild our trust. It is going to require enormous effort and loving time. Zoom doesn't do it, but the Holy Spirit does.

Steve Wolff

Last weekend, after the Sunday service, I met Jamie and Ron, Ellie, Ellie, and Patrick and Ashley in a breakout room. And after the customary pleasantries, we began talking about Patrick's and Ashley's planning for the upcoming arrival of their baby, and we began talking about the preparations of expectant mothers and fathers for a birth in the modern era compared with a birth of a child in times past. And it wasn't long before ideas and advice from those well-equipped to offer advice began to flow, and some offered help, and someone even suggested that Patrick and Ashley not be afraid to reach out if they needed anything. One of the Ellies, maybe Ellie Mixter-Keller, or maybe Ellie Moseley, used the happy phrase send up a flare, for Patrick and Ashley being in an instance when they needed help: don't be afraid to send up a flare! And this prompted me to share with them an example of the sending up of a flare that I had experienced with one of our new families who needed some help.

I had gotten to know Kevin and Lindsay Loughrin and their two children, when they first started attending St. Mark's before the pandemic. In the summer and fall, after things had opened up a bit, Kevin and I would occasionally get a (Covid compliant) Coffee at Stone Creek and have some conversation (with distancing) about Irish Authors and about his writing. (Kevin is a published author and with a name like Loughrin is understandably, ethnically Irish.) Well, it turned out that the Loughrins were going to have a baby. And while they expected (and I expected with them) the time grew closer and the time soon in late fall was upon them. I had no thought that they would run into a difficulty and that they would send up a flare in my direction!

An early weekday morning (a Thursday I think), when I was dead asleep about 3AM, I vaguely heard a phone ringing. It couldn't be my phone...not at this time...and then it stopped...whereupon I congratulated myself...in my daze...and thought about ignoring it...but then those two sounds that occur when a text has been sent and is trying to be noticed...well they occurred...when I had almost turned my innocuous daze into sleep again...and I thought to myself...something is going on that I should be aware of...and I thought of I don't know what else! I forced myself to look at my phone beside my bed and it was a text from Kevin: he needed to get to the hospital...Lindsay was having the baby! And his mother, Debbie, was driving as fast as she could across Iowa and Wisconsin to watch the kids and dog while Kevin could be with Lindsay during the delivery. But she, Debbie, was still a few hours out! And he had sent up a flare to me! And I was lying in bed and thinking of any justification I could for a return to sleep. I remember thinking groggily, he'll find someone else, there is a neighbor, doesn't he know someone else at St. Mark's? Does Lindsay have friends at her work? Anything?

And then my better nature shouted at me: “You idiot! He just moved to Milwaukee! They’ve all just moved to Milwaukee! What has he been telling you? They don’t know anybody! Why do you think he called you! Wake up, you concupiscent idiot! Believe me; I didn’t have the wits to think of the word concupiscent. But I did think of St. Mark’s and my friends in the choir. And I thought of Vince, and my sister, and Elizabeth Jacobs, and Ginny Schrag, and Kelly and Joe and all of those dear, good souls; and I thought of my friends, Frank West, and Mark Hefron, and Harry Moseley; and what they would do? And what would they all think of me in heaven now or when they got there? They who maybe thought of me as a Christian? And I thought of all this in about two minutes ... and I shot out of bed, and I called back and told Kevin, “Of course, be right over. Where do you live? OK, I know where that is... it’s... it’s... it’s gonna take me about half an hour. I’ll be over as fast as I can. OK, thanks...you’ll leave the light on. Good. I can’t read the house numbers from the street like I used to. See yuh...”

I did get there in about half an hour. And Kevin was kind and gracious and grateful, before he shot off to the hospital. But that’s the kind of guy he is...but here...who wouldn’t be? Someone helped him through one of the most important times of his life! The birth of his son, Irvin (or Ike). And I watched the kids and the dog, though my coming didn’t wake up the kids and I didn’t hear them, but I heard the dog — sure I did — the dog barked like he knew for sure I meant no good — and I watched over the whole house until Kevin’s mom got there in a couple of hours.

And all I’ve got to say to you is, don’t tell Kevin or Lindsay about what happened before I jumped into my clothes and car and shot out to the Loughrins’ house, someplace Wauwatosa way. They don’t need to know about my thinking... you know... when I wasn’t ready... well... you know when... just help me out... just keep it mum, that’s all; don’t lie or anything like that, but keep it mum... they should just keep thinking Good Samaritan, that’s what they’re thinking... and I’ll owe yuh.

Fr. Ian Burch

I don’t have a story to offer about worshiping in the pandemic as much as a feeling or a mood. In those early days when we were completely online, I remember the crushing weight of the news broadcasts every day — the number of cases spreading across the country, scientists scrambling to make their best guesses about transmission, and regular people doing our best to find ways to stay safe. Do we wipe down our

groceries? Can we go get gas for the car? Will this last two weeks? Two months? Two years?

Those early days of the pandemic, perhaps March through June of 2020, were for me incredibly fearful ones. I didn't know how the church would stay together. I didn't know whether our people would be safe — especially those in retirement communities. And I didn't know how our teachers and healthcare workers would fare. By the end of that summer, some things (masks, social distancing) were much more clear, but those early days were really difficult on the spirit.

And during every one of those difficult days, St. Mark's prayed. I am in absolute awe that we kept daily online prayer going through each day of this pandemic, Monday through Sunday. Even though those days were so scary and uncertain, somehow, we kept it together enough to prayer with one another. That's probably the miracle for me, when I think about the pandemic.

Now, a year later, some members are being vaccinated, and I believe that in the next few months the pandemic will begin to recede. I hope our parish never has to live through an experience like those early days. Though, I suppose if we do, we will rely on prayer just like we did during this crisis. St. Mark's is as strong as it's ever been, which, given the year we had, is an absolutely miracle. To God be the glory.