

“The CHIMES” – May

Volume 55, No. 5

2020

Continuing the Conversation...

“What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open...See, I have placed before you an open door.” (Revelation 3:7-8)



As I have been navigating the strangest month of ministry I have ever experienced, I am finding myself drawn more deeply into prayer and living my relationship with God more intentionally. I admit, sometimes in the busy-ness of life it can be

too easy to go with the flow, get things done so you can check them off your to-do list...get stuck in a ministry rut, but feel good about all those check marks on that to-do list.

Well, not this past month as much of our lives have been shut down and that which isn't shut down is done with great caution. In the church, we have been forced to learn new things and do things differently. Worship looks very different as we are not allowed to gather and those who have the means watch it online. Those who aren't able to see worship I have been trying to reach out to with notes and phone calls. I miss connecting with you all in person.

This pandemic came as a huge surprise to us. We are used to being in charge of our lives, planning, making lists and checking things off so we can be sure of our productivity. We are used to seeing quick results, we want what we want now. We are used to gathering together with whoever we want whenever we want. We don't like being told what to do, it's just not the American way. It goes against everything we believe about ourselves as strong, independent, individuals. We don't like this surprise at all.

Yes, this pandemic and all of the upheaval and change it has brought into our lives came as a surprise to us. But, it is not a surprise to God.

God did not bring the pandemic upon us, but through it, with so much of the world and its distractions shut down, God may finally be able to get our attention. The world is being shook up, we can't count on cruising through life as usual because life has become very un-usual. In all of this, God is still God and desires that we live life to the fullest trusting in him and bringing hope to a hurting world. Are we listening to God? Are we seeking God with all our heart? Are we desiring to be Christ's hands and feet here in Sparta? Are we reaching out to each other in whatever ways we can bringing hope and encouragement? Are we using the gift of time to stay connected with God in prayer?

Last year about this time I invited you, maybe challenged some of you, to join me in praying a breakthrough prayer twice a day at 6:08 in the morning and evening (or any two times in the day that work for you). If you haven't been praying that prayer I think this is a perfect opportunity to pull it out again, really consider the words, and begin to pray it fervently.

In case you lost your breakthrough prayer, here it is: *God of love and power, we know that you are with us and you are for us. Breakthrough into our lives and into your church that our relationship may flourish with you and each other. Fill us with the grace, mercy, and power of Jesus. Help us discern where your Spirit is leading. Open doors that lead us into a new season of faithfulness and fruitfulness; of growth and service for your Kingdom; exceeding our dreams and expectations. Give us faith and courage to step through the doors that you open as we faithfully follow you, in Jesus name and for your glory. Amen.*

Our God is a living, active, powerful, compassionate God that desires us to love God with all

our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. God opens doors of opportunity and wants to work through us in power and love beyond our expectations. Instead of wasting time listening to conflicting “news” accounts on TV or losing yourself in too much negativity on Facebook or other online media, spend quality, intentional time with God.

Use this time to pray, not only bringing your requests to God but also your praise and thanksgiving, listening with your heart to where God wants to lead you in this time. If you have questions about prayer or struggle to get started give me a call and I will do my best to help you get through your struggle.

Read your Bible starting in the New Testament and asking God to reveal himself to you more fully and then pray some more. As you are reading the Bible in this way let me know if you come across questions that keep you from moving ahead; we will work through those together. I know God loves us more than we can begin to understand and desires to use us in a mighty way to bring glory to God; we just need to clear our hearts and minds and open them to hear more clearly from God and then obediently follow God.

When we are once again able to gather as Christ’s body, the church, it won’t be business as usual (see the article on pages six and seven for more on that). We will have to prayerfully figure out together what our new “normal” is and then live it out faithfully as we *make new and maturing disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.*

God bless you as you seek to
know and love God fully!

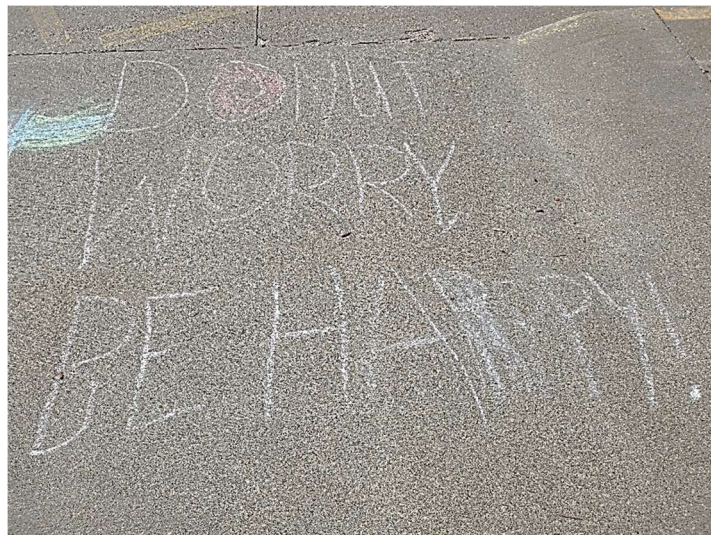
Pastor L

Our Deepest Sympathy to:

The family and friends of Shirley Snow, wife of Ken, mother of Ryan (Kathleen) Snow, Lance (Debra) Snow, Bradley (Linda) Snow, and Mari (Will) Duchaj, for the loss of Shirley.

The family and friends of Roger Thorsen, brother-in-law of Carlyle Randall.

The church building may be closed but that doesn't mean it hasn't been active



Some young chalk artists stopped by to brighten pastor's day with an encouraging message.



Those same artists made hearts with uplifting messages to help spread the love not the germs. If any of our other BASH students would like to make hearts for the church Pastor L would be happy to put them up in our windows; you just need to have your parents drop them off for you (call Pastor L at 608-386-1862 to let her know you will be dropping off hearts). If you need construction paper you can also let Pastor know that and she will make sure you get some.

If you haven't joined us for online worship yet the services can be found on YouTube at Sparta UMC (date). For example the latest service is at Sparta UMC 4 26 20.

Financial Update

The first couple weeks of the COVID-19 “safer at home” shutdown brought a hard hit to our budget as offerings dropped off substantially. Thankfully as some of the shock of our current situation began to settle into a new routine, those who are able have begun getting their offerings into the church either through the mail or online. Thank you for your faithfulness! We have been able to stay current in paying all our bills and ministry obligations.

As a reminder, you can mail your offering to the church at: Sparta UMC, 210 N Court St., Sparta, WI 54656; or you can sign up for electronic giving by going to our church Web site at: lewaughtal.wixsite.com/spartaumc and clicking on the “Give Online” link at the bottom of the page (call the church office or our financial secretary, Heidi Sullivan if you have questions); or check with your financial institution and ask if they have a “bill pay” option that you can send your offering through.

However you choose to give, please know how important that act is to keeping our church alive and vital during this challenging time. Together we will continue faithfully serving God with trust and confidence.



Thank you...

Thank you to everyone who continues to support the church through the shop with scrip program. It is such a simple way to help as you do your regular shopping or eating at your favorite restaurants and those businesses donate a percentage of your spending back to the church.

A big thank you also goes out to Cheryl Isensee for organizing our scrip program and keeping it up and running. The next scrip order will be going in on May 10. You can mail your order directly to Cheryl at: 9262 Festival Avenue, Sparta, WI 54656. If you have questions or need an order form contact Pastor L at the church (269-6949) or on her cell phone at (608-386-1862).



“In remembrance of me heal the sick” TFWS 2254

“And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”

(Matthew 25:39-40)

In the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, when pagans far outnumbered Christians, a pair of epidemics rocked the Roman Empire. After the second in 252 AD, Dionysius (190?-264), Bishop of Alexandria, wrote in an Easter letter how Christians had behaved better toward the sick, than had the pagans. The pagans had run from the sick, abandoned relatives, ejected the dying from their homes and left the dead in the streets. In contrast, Christians diligently ministered to the sick and prepared the dead for burial. As a result, many Christians, themselves, became ill and died; it was a death akin to martyrdom, in the Bishop’s opinion.

The sociologist of religion Rodney Stark, in the Rise of Christianity, has argued that this behavior of early Christians, and similar behavior during other epidemics, was critically important in the early growth of Christianity and its displacement of pagan polytheism. Christians survived at higher rates, the plague disrupted their communities less, they exhibited less fear, and they helped those in dire need. The pagans noticed and in subsequent years, the ranks of Christianity swelled.

One can only hope that history will remember the service and witness of our generation of Christians in the time of the coronavirus epidemic. Did we pray together, did we continue to worship, though from afar, did we give to financially support the mission and ministry of the church? Did we support charities caring for the poor and sick, did we help teach the children home from school, did we help the laid off and furloughed apply for benefits, and did we help the disenfranchised vote, and so on?

You are the answer to my questions.

Jim Wells, Wisconsin United Methodist Foundation
Visit the Wisconsin United Methodist Foundation at
www.wumf.org or Facebook/wumf.org
Or call 1-888-903-9863



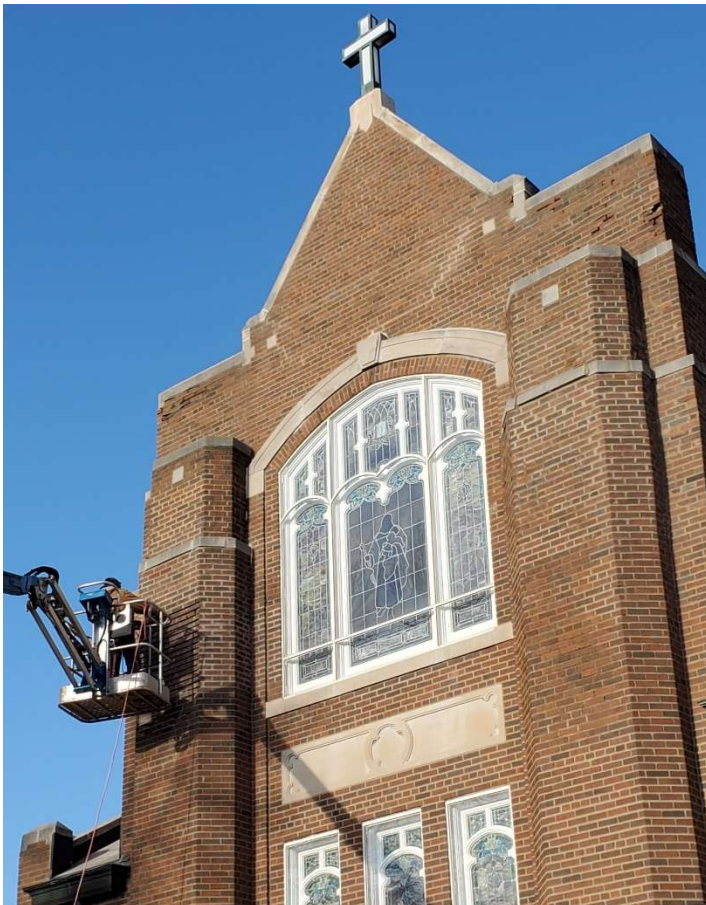
Closed, but not idle

The church building may be closed to the public for the time being, but that doesn't mean nothing has been going on here. There has been an update to fire alarms in the sanctuary; inspection of the kitchen for fire safety and of the fire extinguishers throughout the church...and the biggest activity (literally) has been going on outside the church as Krause Kontruktion came to do the needed work to keep our building dry and safe. Enjoy the pictures of the work progressing.



Because of your faithfulness, we have been able to pay for this work in full. A big thank you to all who supported this important work!

The crew from Krause was great to have around, very nice and always professional. They did an awesome job of cleaning up after themselves and repairing areas in the lawn that needed it after their heavy equipment sat there.



From the Parish Nurse...

Hello Everyone—here we are, all facing the same thing together, while being apart.

The physical distance we are experiencing can be a great challenge. Schools, business, and churches have closed their doors for an indefinite period of time.

What shall we as Christians say amidst such difficulty and troubling times? How can we find hope and encouragement? The diverse voices of news and media are loud and contradictory and confusion abounds. We are consumed by hearing anyone and everyone's opinion of what to do and how to think in the COVID-19 crisis. And yet the Psalmist describes an uncommon posture, "For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from Him." Silence is undoubtedly a forgotten practice in this generation.

For many of us, silence is merely the act of not speaking; but silence should be about listening to God. In our prayers, are we speaking more or listening more? What can be found in listening prayer? The Psalmist indicates hope and rest! If we embrace slowing down and stepping into silence with God, we will grow in our confidence of tomorrow's reality and take hold of hope. Furthermore it is not just hope we find; we find God, the source of all hope, in our silence.

In a culture which is accustomed to running 100 mph all day every day, the very idea of staying indoors for weeks or even months on end with limited interaction with those around us can be daunting to say the least.

Remember that God is in control! He is the Lord of history and Creator of everything which exists. There is nothing which escapes Him. Not a drop of rain falls nor a blade of grass buds without Him knowing it. His power and knowledge know no limit; and He has promised to use that omnipotence for us.

The very nature of God is love. And love always seeks the good of the other. So God, who loves us, isn't even capable of doing evil to us. It's against His nature. All things work together for the good of those who love God (Romans 8:28).

He is the Good Shepherd, our rock of refuge, a stronghold for us. Although we walk in the valley of darkness, he is at our side; so what have we to fear?



We do not like to feel powerless and yet, situations like this help us come to terms with our limitations. We do not ultimately control the health and wellbeing of our loved ones, and we cannot fully predict the future of this virus or its impact on society. From a Christian perspective, there is an opportunity in this.

When we come to the end of ourselves and our power, we encounter the mercy of God. We find permission to be afraid, dependent, and uncertain, because He is infinite, dependable and sure.

The Christian story allows us to access our vulnerability in the face of the unknown, but it also provides us with a source of true courage. Because God dignified humanity by taking on flesh in the person of Jesus, we can be confident that our physical bodies are of utmost importance to Him. And because God raised Jesus from the dead, we can be sure that our own suffering will not be the final word. He is the Lord of History, and He has already given Himself for the life of the world. We are now called to follow His example in the power of the Holy Spirit.

This season of physical distancing and self-quarantine offers challenges that differ depending on our situations; teleworking and homeschooling children; loneliness from not physically being with others, practicing patience while spending more time than usual in small spaces with family.

This season also offers new opportunities. The common response, "sorry, I am too busy," is taking a hiatus from most of our lives. Instead, we are invited to embrace slowing down.

My advice is to embrace this gift of time many of us have been given. Find ways to embrace it. In scripture, it is often in the silence when we encounter God, so I also hope that during this stillness, people will find spiritual solace and ways to connect with Our Heavenly Father.

Church may be closed, but the work of the church continues—it has always been Christians loving the Lord above all else, and their neighbors above themselves. We must continue to pray for our Pastor and Congregation, and our Nation and each other. Jesus commands believers to make the most of their time, because the days are fleeting. We make the most of our time by reading our daily devotionals, reading the Bible. Be intentional about emailing /phoning or messaging friends. While churches are closed, encourage everyone to Godliness as much as you are able.

In Christ's Love,
Priscilla Hemmersbach, RN
Parish Nurse

I came across the following article and received permission to share it as a way to start conversation here at SUMC. It was not written to cause panic, but to help us realize that we can't rely on going back to what we have always done once we are able to gather again. In fact, the governor's plan has us starting up in stages as certain milestones are met in the battle against COVID-19. The article is also meant to help us look forward to the best practices for this congregation. Please join in this important conversation. I did not include all of the questions posed in the article because some were obviously geared to much larger churches.

Questions Your Church Should Answer Before People Return

By Ken Braddy, kenbraddy.com

As the country begins to slowly re-open, I can guarantee that we will not go back to “business as usual” as a country, and that includes our churches. If you think we’ll all rush back to church and pick up where we left off, don’t kid yourself – it’s not going to happen. Or at least it *shouldn’t* happen. We need to think and plan carefully so we do not endanger people simply because we let our guard down and believed that the Coronavirus crisis had passed. Now, as believers let’s agree to live by faith and not operate in fear, but let’s also agree to be proactive and to act in wisdom towards our members and guests, especially those among us who are most susceptible to becoming infected with COVID-19.

We have a short time to prepare for the return of the church to the church campus. As I have thought about my church, and listened to friends and ministry experts over the past several weeks, I’ve compiled a list of things that most of our churches are not thinking about. Let’s think through several things that we must think about before the church returns to the building:

1. **What if your worship gathering is initially limited to no more than 100 people?** Never happen, you say? Remember that we’ve been limited to gatherings of no more than 10 people in the recent past. Take my church, for example. Pre-COVID 19 we averaged 350 in worship (two services). Should we be planning on adding a third service, reducing the time to 45 minutes with a 15 minute “passing period” so that worshipers can either go to Bible study or go home?



2. **Should you add and/or shorten worship services to allow for social distancing?** I touched on this in #1 above, but let’s drill down a bit. If physical gatherings are limited in size, you have a few options: (1) offer more services (2) encourage people to continue worshiping online (3) block off pews so that people no longer sit right behind someone, reducing the chances of them sneezing or coughing directly into the back of the person in front of them. If your church reopens with the “worship only” option, you’ll have to decide these things now.
3. **Will you reopen the doors of your church with a “worship only” strategy?** I am hearing of more and more churches that are choosing this option whenever we are allowed to meet again on campus. They are adding services, practicing social distancing, and focusing on regaining momentum in worship.
4. **Is a physical “pass the plate” offering a thing of the past?** How would you feel if you were the 100th person in a worship service to touch the offering plate that 99 other people just touched? Would you be worried about COVID-19 transmission? Sure you would. So how will you take up your weekly offering?
5. **What are you doing now to sanitize and sterilize your church building?** Now is the time to wipe down all classrooms (especially those where children meet because of the toys and other items they touch during the course of a Wednesday class experience). Have you sprayed pews and chairs with disinfectant? Who is wiping door knobs and handles? Have you had carpet cleaned and disinfected? Now is the time for all this to take place, not the week of the “you can go back to church” announcement by government officials.
6. **What’s your strategy to clean and sanitize your church in real time?** It’s one thing to prepare in advance of people’s return to the church building, but how will you keep the place clean and disinfected on a Sunday, Tuesday, or Wednesday? Does this give rise to a new team of people on campus whose ministry it is to walk around wiping door knobs and other surfaces? Who is going to clean restrooms throughout the morning or evening? Remember you’ll have hundreds (some of your churches may have thousands) of people touching things while they are on campus.

7. **Are you going to continue hosting special events?** Will your church continue to host weddings? How about funerals? Dinners? Dramas? Choirs? Children's programs/choir? You get the idea – there are a number of special events that our churches might host. Which ones will continue, and which ones will be put on hold? And how will you explain which ones continue and which ones don't?
8. **Will you continue offering virtual online worship?** Some churches may think of their recent foray into Facebook Live or YouTube as a means to provide a worship experience for their people a thing of the past – a stop-gap measure during some really strange days. But is that the right strategy? I have heard of church after church whose leaders tell me their worship attendance is up – significantly – because people are finding them online.
9. **Should you be investing in new digital equipment right now?** Yes, we've all hopped online and used Facebook Live or Youtube to broadcast our worship services. Some of us are doing that with iPads and other devices, but is this the time to admit that online worship is probably here to stay? If yes, then it makes sense to invest dollars now so that cameras and other equipment can be purchased that will help the church be more professional in the new online world of worship.
10. **Will a new staff or volunteer position emerge from COVID-19?** Because the church has permanently moved online now, could it lead to the adoption of a new or expanded position? Will churches turn their attention to a position to oversee the technical aspects of the new digital frontier? Will they become responsible to develop groups and strategies to reach people online? It's highly likely that this is going to take place; the role may first be added to a staff person who is currently serving the church, but when it is possible to split that role and afford a new person, churches may hire online pastors.
11. **Is this the time to end your church's "meet and greet" time?** Because of physical distancing rules, it is. Some churches value the opportunity to gather, have coffee, and fellowship. In a COVID-19 world, it is a good idea *not* to let that happen.
12. **Because people may return very slowly to church, how will you count attendance and effectiveness?** The question has already been raised about should we or should we not take

attendance during online worship and online group Bible studies. You need to decide now if you're going to count on-campus only attendance, or merge and add online attendance, too. And how will group leaders take a count in their online groups and go about reporting that?

13. **Are you going to cancel mid-week services, meals, and Bible studies?** This won't be a forever thing, but in the near future following the return of the church to its buildings, will you continue a virtual, online prayer meeting and Bible study time? Can you find volunteer workers to support a mid-week strategy on campus? Do you want to put many people around tables for the traditional mid-week meal on Wednesday nights?
14. **What's your plan for Sunday School curriculum/Bible studies?** Most churches have provided print products – we call them Personal Study Guides (for group members); some adults still refer to them as "quarterlies" because they are distributed at church at the beginning of a new quarter. But because of social distancing and the new emphasis on virtual groups, should you keep print products but add digital ones for those groups meeting off campus?
15. **Do you have a plan for reducing expenses if your church's offerings don't rebound?** This is the time for a "budget scrub" – while offerings are still decent and expenses have been lower because of reduced activities. Churches need to be thinking, "What if..." – what if our offerings don't hold steady because of rising unemployment of members? Before the church returns to the building, every church needs a "plan B" strategy just in case giving drops in late summer or early fall. I have friends in ministry that I deeply respect who believe we (the church) have not felt the financial impact of COVID-19 like we will in the days and months ahead. I think they may be right.

This list of questions is not exhaustive. It's representative of many things we should be thinking about right now, before we get the OK from government leaders to gather again.

A little faith and a lot of common sense will go along way in keeping us a healthy, vibrant community of faith committed to doing the work of God.



Thank you to...

Thank you Cyndi Wise for decorating the Easter cross and thank you Bob for helping to get the cross set up outside so it was there giving us all a sign of resurrection hope on Easter morning and throughout Easter week.



Please stay
SAFE AT
Home

Happy Mothers Day to all
moms, grannies, great
grannies, step moms,
foster moms, and those
who lost their mom. Moms
are priceless!

Unknown

COVID-19 and "Safer-at-Home" Notice:

Dear SUMC Members and Friends,

As we continue to distance ourselves and stay "safer at home," Pastor Loretta continues to work between the church and her home office, checking phone messages and emails and picking up the mail so we can make sure that essential business is still taken care of (paying bills, depositing offerings, etc.).

With the help of Lynn and Larry Humphrey and Cyndi Wise we also continue to have worship services online. Thank you to Joel Tock for working with us on audio. I hope many of you are able to participate in worship in this way until we are able to gather once again.

The ad council has had a couple of meetings online using Zoom. We are still working and hoping to get more of the ad council involved in these meetings, but it has been nice to see people and discuss some of the business of the church.



Here we are at our first Zoom ad council meeting.

With all of that said, please know we need to stay in touch as best we can through phone calls, texts, Facebook, online worship, etc. Pastor Loretta is still available through all of these means and you can also be there for each other, checking in, finding creative ways to stay in touch. Maybe get out your new pictorial directory and pick a couple of different people a day to call or send a note to.

If you have recently changed/updated your email address, please let us know in the church office. If you have never shared your email address with us, now would be a great time to do it to stay the most up-to-date with what is going on.

We will get through this together and hopefully stronger.

Pastor Loretta