

Worshiping as a Community in a Time of Pandemic

A Report to the Synod of the Trinity Concerning the Technology Grant Awarded July 2020

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
50 Stratmore Street
Pittsburgh PA 15205

We combined the funds from the Synod with some of our own resources and purchased a number of items that would allow us to move our service of worship online. Included were:

- A used MacBook to stream the service
- A Canon Vixia HF R800 camcorder
- An Avergamer Mini capture card
- An iRig Pro audio interface
- A used Lenovo Thinkpad to run the PowerPoint
- A used 19" monitor to display the liturgy/song lyrics
- A Torjim 60" tripod
- Assorted cables and cords
- Assorted Plexiglas shields for musicians and the pulpit

We reconfigured our chancel area to allow social distancing for our six-person worship team, and we made the decision to conduct our worship services in almost the same manner as we had done prior to the pandemic. While we are aware of the fact that other congregations have chosen to adapt their orders of service so as to have less singing or abbreviated liturgy, we have decided that we want to try to preserve as much "normality" as possible. This includes congregational singing (lyrics on screen, led by the worship band), responsive readings, children's sermons, and shared prayer concerns.

Since March, the overwhelming majority of our worship participation has been online. From August – November, we allowed up to 30 people to attend in person each week, but our online congregation is far more numerous. In an effort to keep children and young people engaged, we have encouraged families and young confirmands to serve as liturgists and musicians.

While the technology has, at times, been deeply challenging, we have also found new avenues of growth and new opportunities to trust. In addition, we have seen the reach of our small inner-city Pittsburgh congregation expand in ways we could not have imagined. Most weeks, we have participants in our livestream from Massachusetts, California, Louisiana, Florida, Delaware, and across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. In addition, we usually have several viewers from Canada as well as our partner churches in Malawi and South Sudan in Africa; we've also welcomed guests from Sweden and Peru.

We have found ways to use the livestream to mark many important events in the life of our church family. We have celebrated one adult and two infant baptisms since March, and have rejoiced as not only our confirmation class, but another adult have made public professions of faith. During these moments in worship, we encourage those participating online to answer the congregational questions by typing “I do” or “I will” in the comment section of the livestream. We have also had occasion to broadcast special services, such as weddings and funerals, and thereby include many more people in the worshipping community than we might otherwise have imagined.

We have sought to respond to some of the challenges presented by physical separation in a number of ways. For instance, in April we assembled “Holy Week Kits” for anyone wishing to participate. These included palm fronds for Palm Sunday, the elements for communion on Maundy Thursday, and a packet of flower seeds to plant on Easter Sunday. The kits were available for pick-up, delivery, and even mailed to out-of-state participants. We have recently distributed “Advent Kits”, which include the elements of communion, sticker and activity books for children, a few greeting cards to be sent to those who are vulnerable to loneliness and isolation, an advent wreath kit, candles for Christmas Eve worship, and more. We realize that some folk are comfortable using their own resources for the Lord’s Supper or candle lighting, but we also feel it’s important to allow friends the ability to have a tangible connection with the sanctuary.

While no one in our congregation is enjoying this pandemic, we are delighted at the way that we have been able to grow in our understanding of what it means to be connected in worship. In 2019, our “average attendance” at worship was 92 people. We do not have a clue, really, as to how many people are participating these days. Each week the livestream brings an opportunity for those who are home-bound to extend a greeting via Facebook, to be “seen” by answering questions or sharing prayer concerns, and to remain vital participants in one another’s lives. We would not have even thought about launching such an initiative prior to the “stay at home” order, and we would not have felt like we had the resources without help from the Synod of the Trinity. Thank you. Below you will find some testimonials we’ve received from those who have connected with our worship online. Photos attached.

(from a long-time member of our congregation) Every year you do a very nice service for All Saints Day, but I have always felt like a bystander. This year’s was especially meaningful to me. When Janet died back in January, I felt shock. She had health problems, but I never expected her to die. I never cried at the funeral home. I didn’t cry at the cemetery.

Today opened the flood gates. All year I have been wondering about what was wrong with me. I guess I just needed the right starter. Thank you for today’s service. I definitely did not need to be in the building for it to get to me.

(from a Canadian friend of the church) We have been enjoying attending your church services very much, and we are very grateful for the outreach that the services online permit. Yesterday we couldn’t attend, as we were in conversation via Zoom with family near and far, so we listened in today on YouTube. Thanks for the wisdom you bring to these

challenging times and for inviting us into the opportunity that we have to respond with compassion... We have truly appreciated attending Crafton Heights church. Each week, we find ourselves discussing the sermon long after the service and finding hope in the connections between today and the biblical texts. Dave, I hope you know just how your gifts have impact and reach. Your insights are communicated as offerings, your wisdom as invitation. We thank you.

(from a participant living in South Sudan) I find myself as a member of this Church... Our government has banned all public gatherings including Church services as a measure to prevent the various from spreading. There is no confirm case of Corona in South Sudan yet. Our borders have been closed and our airport as well. Schools are closed. Our God is still in control. Thank you!

(from a member of the community) Thank you for a wonderful message that challenges us to make a Christian response to all of the crises that are surrounding us at this point and to be forward looking to see where God through his Spirit is leading us because if we are really honest it wasn't all that great all the time back there and no wonder God doesn't want us to go back there - at least that's the way I see it!

*Thank you for your leadership as well as your message – it is much needed for me. I have to confess that all this quarantine business and stuff is getting a little bit to me even though I am quite capable and don't mind at all being alone.
Serving Christ with you!*

(from a member of the church) I'm close to walking away from my business because it got really hard...I've lost all of my clients due to financial reasons and for the first time in a long time, money is a heavy burden. I prayed hard this morning to be given direction because I love what I do, but it's not providing.

I ask you to pray for guidance.

I appreciate you and the community you've provided for me.

We can do hard things ❤️

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David B. Carver". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

David B Carver

Pastor

The First U. P. Church of Crafton Heights

Pittsburgh Presbytery



The livestream set-up, including the camera, laptops, monitor, and cables.

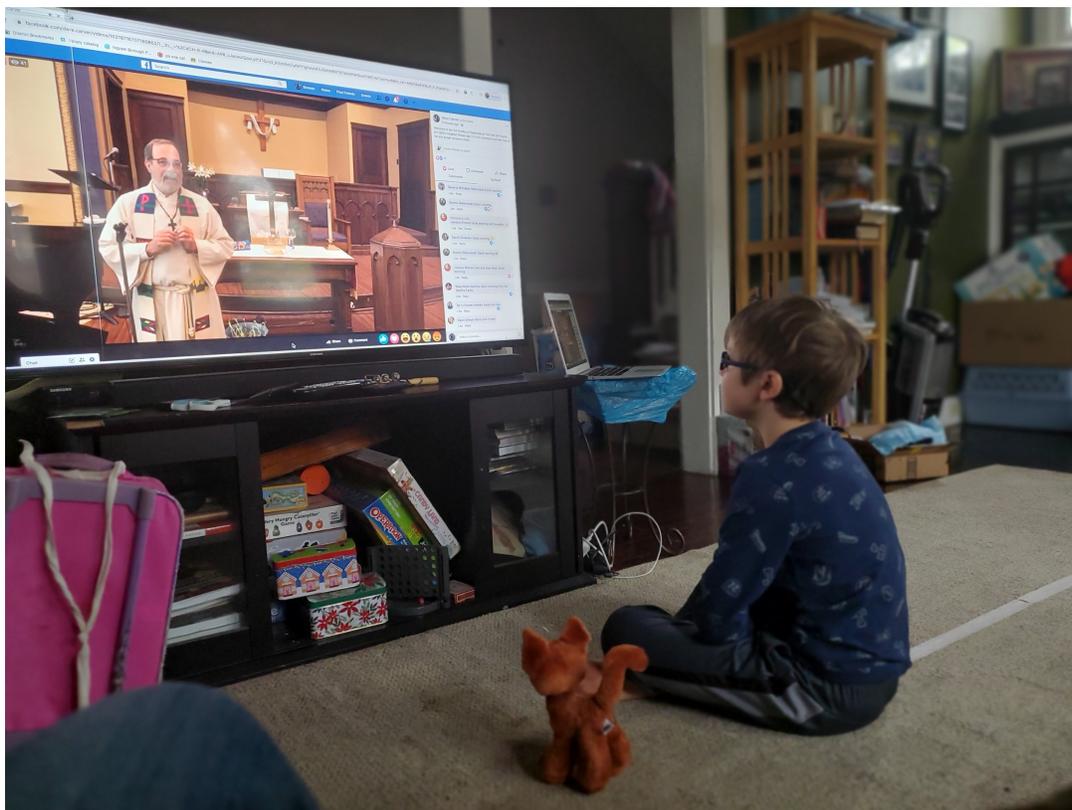


We have included younger readers and worship leaders as a way of helping them to feel connected – and bringing joy to our “senior members” who can see their young friends online.

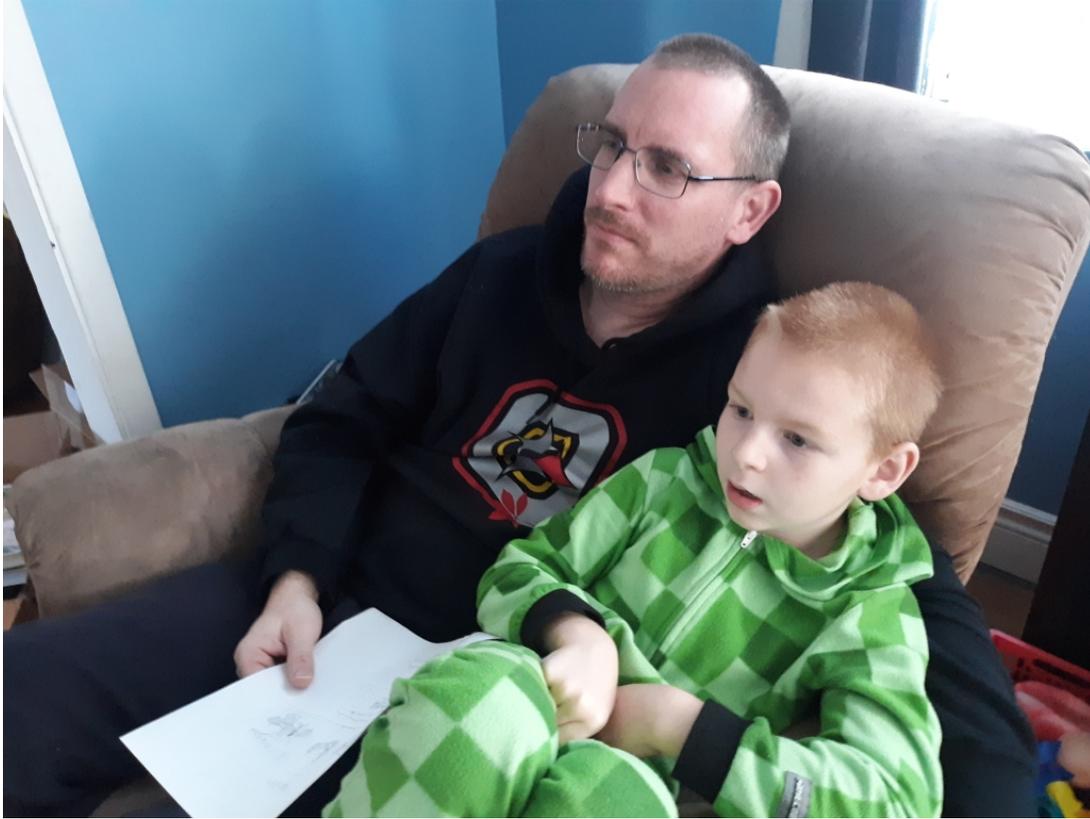


Facebook post interface for "First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights". The post title is "The Service of Worship With Baptism". The text of the post reads: "Welcome to worship! We are glad to be together virtually in this space! Please use the 'comments' f...". It shows 49 comments and 260 views. The comments section is visible, showing three comments from users named Tim, Ben, and Ben, all with the text "We do..".

Screenshot indicating worshippers answering the questions of faith during a baptism



Hunter takes part in the Childrens' sermon via the livestream



Brogan and his dad, Matt, worship from home

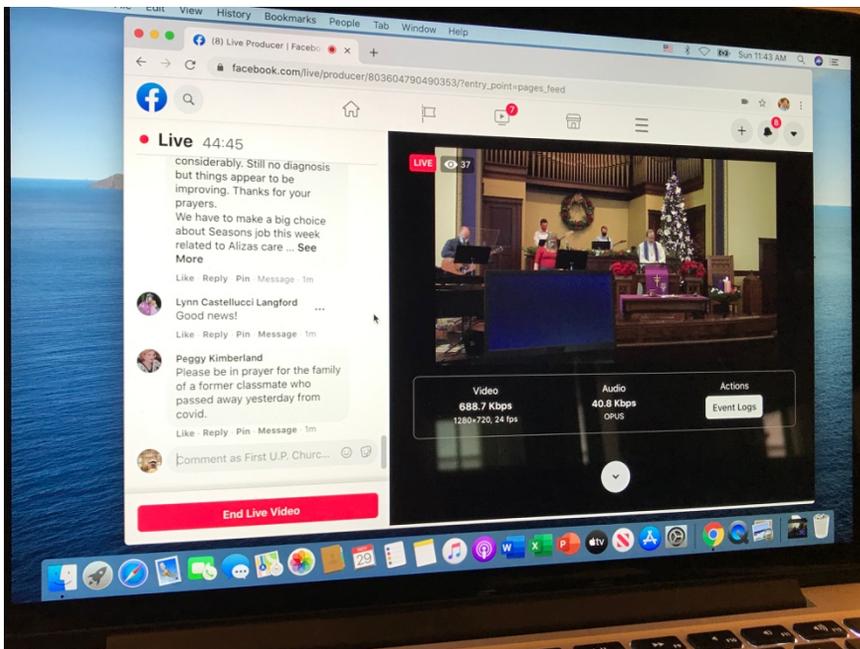
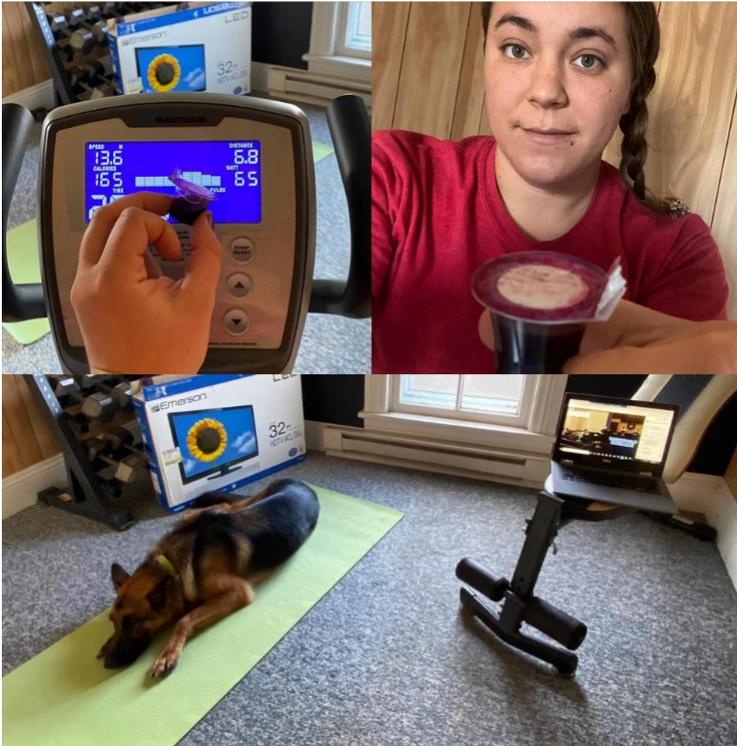


As the childrens' sermon progresses (L), Lydia, Levi, and Micah take part from home (R)

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Sometimes, this is how you participate in communion. Dog on the yoga mat, virtual worship set up on the weight bench and an hour on the exercise bike. Home "gym" church.

One of our young adult parishioners shared this with her social media friends in an effort to describe what communion looks like in 2020!



The Facebook livestream makes sharing prayer concerns easy for those who have access to this technology. Here, congregants care for each other in this space.



Maya and Allison help their parents lead the congregation by lighting the Advent wreath. We encouraged viewers at home to have their own wreaths as well.



Amiya learns about Advent using the sticker booklet that came in her family's kit.