

EXPLORATIONS



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Being Church in a Pandemic

**The Rev. Timothy H. Grayson
Timonium, MD**

The disciples were in a quandary. The large crowd that had gathered to be healed by Jesus and to hear him preach had quickly dispersed when rumors about an outbreak of leprosy took hold. They fled in terror to their homes nearby, leaving the disciples wondering how they could get their Master's message across to those who had been desperate to hear the Good News. The disciples went to Jesus and said they were stumped. "Well, what do you have with you?" asked Jesus. "Just a smart phone, a tripod, and a couple of hand-held mics," they replied. "Bring them here to me," said Jesus. And he took them in his hands, lifted them up and blessed them, at the same time praying for decent Wi-Fi reception. And that's how the first recorded live stream of a service took place on a hillside in Galilee more than 2,000 years ago.

Jesus always managed to find a way to get his message across, whether it was commanding a large crowd to sit down in rows on a hillside so he could feed them in an orderly fashion or commandeering a boat so he could preach to a crowd from offshore, where the acoustics were better. Somehow, he got the job done. On the other hand, when the Covid-19 pandemic struck, we mortal ministers were as stumped as the disciples in the fanciful tale above. Few churches were equipped with cameras and good-quality microphones and sound systems; plus they lacked resources and the people who knew how to operate such equipment, and had Wi-Fi-resistant architecture. We were all caught short, with the result that many church buildings were closed for weeks because of fears of spreading the virus.

But human ingenuity, aided immeasurably by the Holy Spirit, gradually prevailed.

At my current church, in Sykesville, we are blessed with live stream capabilities, although our audio feed went silent minutes before the Christmas Eve service last year, causing widespread palpitations in the hearts of the few participants present. When snow and ice would have made travel to the church extremely hazardous on a few Sundays in February, we canceled the live stream from church and instead streamed the service by Zoom from our family room at home.

(Continued)

I will always remember celebrating the Holy Eucharist using a draped picnic table as an altar with a wood fire roaring in the grate behind me.

Most churches eventually managed to cope with the technical challenges of live streaming via YouTube or Facebook or Zoom, and now many of them have settled into various forms of “hybrid worship”—partly online and partly in person. Of course, the inconveniences remain. Wearing a mask for a one-hour service is uncomfortable and flashing the peace sign at someone is not as satisfying as shaking their hand or embracing them. We are, after all, incarnate beings and we literally need to touch each other. Participating in online worship is exhausting after a while and seems to require a greater concentration level than sitting in a pew on a Sunday.

More important, and of great concern to church professionals, is that enforced absence from in-person worship during the pandemic has led people to lose the habit and rhythm of attending church on Sunday. It is said that it takes seven weeks to create a habit, and we’ve been in this state of suspension now for 19 months. Whether out of concern for their own health or that of their children, many adults are continuing to stay away from church, and we fear they may never come back. While online worship might not be all that appealing, attending worship in your pajamas and slippers with a cup of coffee in your hand does have its attractions.

I will always remember celebrating the Holy Eucharist using a draped picnic table as an altar with a wood fire roaring in the grate behind me.

One thing I’m sure of: the Christian faith will survive, although the Church will never be the same. And yet, that might be a good thing. The Holy Spirit has a habit of roiling the waters just when we are about to drop our robes and take a relaxing dip, which might be God’s way of saying, “Don’t get too complacent, because I’m about to do a new thing, and finally I have your attention.” Those who want the Church to be the same as it was before the pandemic don’t realize that going backwards is rarely a good thing. We have learned so much during this time, and despite the inconveniences, we have managed to foster community and worship our Creator in ways that we never thought possible.

As a priest working three-quarter time, I am now spending more time at home instead of at the office. I enjoy my walks through my neighborhood in the fall sunlight, luxuriating in taking “a long, loving look at the real,” which is how Walter Burghardt, S.J. described contemplation. I now have the time to truly look at things, not just glance at them, and the pandemic seems also to have cracked people open. I sense a new willingness to examine how our interior lives are being transformed by the pressures the pandemic has imposed on us and with that willingness has come a greater appreciation of the healing power of silence and the benefits of prayerful listening—listening deeply to Christ in ourselves and in each other. As people of faith, we look forward to the future in hope, not despair. Dag Hammarskjöld, former Secretary General of the United Nations, expressed this hope well when he wrote: “For all that has been, Thanks! To all that shall be, Yes!”

The Rev. Tim Grayson, a member of the board of trustees of Listening Hearts, is currently Priest-in-Charge of St. Barnabas Episcopal Church in Sykesville, MD.

Discerning a Way into Retirement

**The Rev. Brian Fidler
San Diego, CA**

When I began to circulate news of my retirement after 38 years of ordained ministry, the universal question I was asked was, “What are you going to *do*?” I found myself troubled by the explicit assumption that I needed to find equivalent ways to stay busy in retirement, and I learned to derail the question with the same answer every time: “I’m going to spend my first six months getting good and bored!”

I remember thinking to myself, “Why do I have to *do* anything?” Hasn’t one of the perennial challenges of my vocation been that I was always overly busy? I began to read, and to reflect about my own assumptions about retirement. Why am I choosing to retire now? What proportion of my retirement do I want to be about “being” and what proportion about “doing”? Am I entitled to create a degree of separation between my life of faith and my lifelong vocation as a priest (i.e., can I say “No, not this time” to my bishop)? What might a new chapter of life look like?

I quickly realized I was far better at asking these questions than answering them! Within the first three months of my retirement I had committed to a twenty-hour per week diocesan volunteer position, and for the next three years I continued to say yes to all but one invitation to “do” more. These ministries felt right and good, some of them became richly rewarding, and my efforts were met with gratitude by those around me. But the cumulative effect after three years brought me full circle to the questions I’d asked myself when I first retired, as I felt my fatigue rebuilding to preretirement levels.

I am grateful for the timeliness of my Listening Hearts training to convene Parish Discernment Committees, which led me into a deeper, quieter discernment about all that I was being invited to do. A segment of that discernment process was dedicated to practical considerations—what I like to think of as “estimating the cost” (Luke 14:28) of responding to a call, to oneself and to those around us. For me, discernment led to hearing and reclaiming a deferred passion for writing. Gradually, as I completed each of my pledged commitments, I reconnected with writing projects I’d begun years ago, alongside new ones. In the past six months I have found myself in a place that is every bit as richly rewarding and less exhausting, as I write my way (literally) into a new chapter of retirement. I continue to “do” in the Church and in my community in far more modest ways now, having gradually discovered greater balance in how to “be” in this new chapter of my life.

Each of us when anticipating retirement will discern our own way in and through it, and as with all other forms of ministry, each of us will chart our own course as we attend to the movement of God’s Spirit in our lives. My own experience suggests that this will never be a once-and-for-all activity; I fully anticipate that new invitations and new opportunities will prompt ongoing discernment—ongoing opportunities to hear that to which God may be calling me to respond—in this new chapter of my life. I pray daily for the capacity to continue to listen, to discern my way into retirement.

The Rev. Brian Fidler is a “retired” priest in the Episcopal Diocese of San Diego. Prior to his retirement in 2018 he served for 38 years as chaplain in a handful of Episcopal schools nationwide.

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Listening Hearts Ministries
provides a range of programs,
publications, and services that teach
people the practice of spiritual
discernment through prayerful listening
in supportive communities.

*Spiritual discernment is an ever-evolving journey into God.
It always sheds enough light to help us see the next step
as we seek to follow our true path.*

— Keeping in Tune with God, p. 28

discernment

listening quiet still receptive
for subtle inklings of a breeze:
Spirit flows gently into my skull
wafts her way toward my heart

she rarely plays dramatic roles
of hungry flame or swooping dove
or even rushing roaring wind
so I'm attentive lest I miss her gig

if I'm not careful I'll never hear
the soft sweet piping of her notes
as she meanders through my body
and evokes a melody of invitation

by turns explorer actor musician
with boundless pneumatic ingenuity
her playful creativity nudges mine
pokes at snoozing bits of my soul

trusting in something within me
ready to be activated awakened
ripe to respond to her coaxing call
thirsty for her gift of inspiration

if only I am listening

— Michael Croghan, May 2021