

Council Corner

Sunday, March 15, now six weeks distant, is a worship Sunday we won't easily forget. On Friday, March 13 (yes, a Friday the 13th!) Governor Wolf announced that Pennsylvania's public and private school system would be shut down for a minimum of two weeks as a precaution to halt the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. Pennsylvania was not the first state to close its schools, but we certainly understood our Governor's action as we began to grasp the true magnitude of this pandemic.

Governor Wolf placed restrictions cautiously, and on March 15 gatherings were limited to no more than fifty people, roughly the size of a typical worship service here at St. Paul. Of course, just a couple of days later the gathering number had dropped to ten, and we realized that we could no longer hold worship services in the sanctuary. Under those circumstances, on Wednesday, March 18, Pastor Filer and his assistants recorded the first Sunday worship service to be available on our St. Paul website and YouTube. Four services have been completed so far, and it looks like virtual worship will be the preferred delivery system for the immediate future. Of course, Council is aware that we have some members who do not own computers or have access to the Internet. For them, the new format is not accessible, but televised worship services from across the United States are abundant on any Sunday morning.

On Thursday evening, March 19, we held our monthly Council meeting in Spies Hall with a circular arrangement of tables and members at least ten feet apart. For the two meetings we have held since then, and the meetings held by our Call Committee to secure a new pastor, we have been utilizing a relatively new program called *Zoom*. Zoom (from Vista Communications in San Jose, California) has been part of business technology since about 2013, but it has gained greater popularity and use during this period of self-isolation and pandemic. Those "attending" a meeting can participate with a computer, a cell phone, or an I-pad; depending upon their level of technology, they can see and hear the other members of the group. Perhaps most amazing, Zoom offers the entry level to their program at no charge for forty-minute sessions that can usually be extended.

As wonderful as Zoom and other similar conferencing programs might be, the experience is not the same as meeting in person with all of the interaction of a typical Council meeting. The same can be said of Sunday worship: watching a recorded or livestreamed worship service is not the same as gathering in the sanctuary with our church family, joining our voices during the liturgy, the Psalm, and the hymns. We are experiencing a very different "church" in these challenging times, and we do not yet know what a "new normal" may look like. To those of us who don't embrace technology joyfully, it's a time to approach these adaptations with cautious optimism and an open mind.

In closing, I am reminded of the lyrics to Joni Mitchell's 1970 hit song "Big Yellow Taxi." The song is primarily about the destruction of our natural environment, and it seems especially appropriate as we face the environmental, economic, and social impact of the coronavirus pandemic. Here are the well-known words from the chorus that is repeated throughout the song:

*Don't it always seem to go
That you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone?
They paved paradise and put up a parking lot.*

Let us hope and pray that when we emerge from this pandemic to whatever becomes the new normal, we will have a new appreciation for the natural environment we have been given and an even greater appreciation for the opportunity to worship God, who has given us everything we need.

Bill Below