



When congregations can't congregate: Pandemic forces Michiganders to rethink church

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When members of First Presbyterian Church in Kalamazoo gather for the Holy Week services, it will be the first time in months the congregation will be together under the same roof.

Like most congregations across Michigan, it's been unsettling year for First Presbyterian.

The church moved to online services last spring at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. They transitioned to in-person worship at the church for a few weeks in the summer, but when coronavirus case numbers started to rise, they switched to outdoor services. In November, the church reverted back to online services, which have continued since.

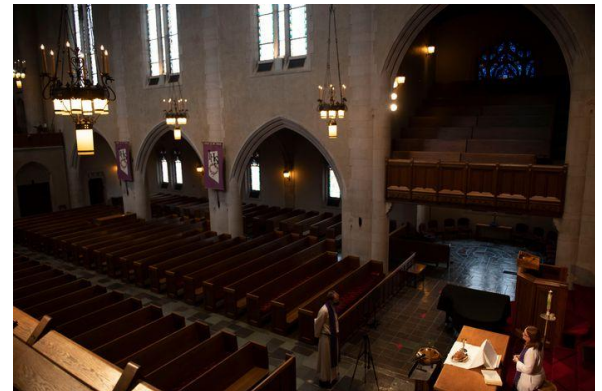
"It's hard. It's weird," said the Rev. Seth Weeldreyer, head pastor of First Presbyterian. "Our faith is an embodied faith; it's not just about ideas but how we live it with other people. And when you can't be with other people, it makes it hard."

He said he's happy that technology has allowed worship services to continue. "Something is better than nothing, and I'm grateful for the conversations that I can have on Zoom or FaceTime or whatever," he said. "But it's not the same."

As with many other aspects of society, the coronavirus pandemic has created tremendous upheaval among Michigan's religious institutions.

Although houses of worship were exempt from Michigan's lockdown orders last spring, most congregations moved their worship services and other interactions completely online during that period.

Some have yet to resume in-person services. Others have returned to their buildings, but have had to enact rules about masks and social distancing. Activities such as giving communion and singing have had to be rethought and adapted. At many places, social hours and church dinners are now a memory. Ceremonies such as funerals, weddings and baptisms have been severely downsized, if they're held at all.



Nicole Hester

Churches go virtual during Covid-19 Pandemic

Pastor Seth Weeldreyer, in aisle, and Associate Pastor Chrissy Westbury, at lectern, are recorded for a virtual church service on Thursday, March 25, 2021 in Kalamazoo.

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“I would call it disorienting,” Weeldreyer said. “At the same time, it’s been a clarifying experience that makes us think about what’s really important. We’ve had to explore new ways of loving people and trying to keep that at the core of everything we do. Life is a pilgrimage journey, and that’s what this is.”

Dr. Fran Bruder Melgar, a parishioner at St. Thomas More Catholic Church in Kalamazoo, is among those who very much missed attending church in person during the initial weeks of the lockdown.

“I live alone so I was really missing that,” she said. Then she volunteered to be one of the readers at Sunday Mass, which allowed her to be one of a handful of people in the church while it was being livestreamed.

It was a powerful experience to have that sense of community again, she said.

“I was experiencing communion in a way I had never experienced it before, having been kind of deprived of it for the two months or so,” Melgar said. “It was so powerful to receive that gift in a very difficult time. It was really a blessing for me to be in that space.”

When St. Tom’s did resume in-person services, seating was limited and people had to reserve a spot in advance, she said.

“But still, for awhile, there were many, many people not comfortable with doing that” and who continued to watch the service online, she said. It’s only recently, as people have gotten vaccinated, that St. Tom parishioners are returning in larger numbers to attending Mass in person.

While First Presbyterian and St. Tom’s are large congregations with hundreds of members, Westminster Presbyterian Church in Jackson has 62 members. Before the pandemic, attendance at Sunday service ranged from 25 to 35, Pastor Karen Kelley says.

Since the pandemic, the church has mainly worshipped online, although there were a couple of outdoor service, the last in September. The next one will be an Easter morning service next weekend.

But for most Sundays for the past year, it’s Kelley leading a service on Zoom.

“The recommendations for people who were doing online worship have to make the services more simple, because people’s attention spans online are only so long,” she said. “But the leadership of this congregation really wanted to keep it as much the same as possible.

“So we do, right down to the time where we would normally greet each other with handshakes and whatever, we still say the same words of greeting to each other. We just aren’t here in person.”

As she’s preaching, Kelley said, she can see a list of who is watching. “That’s partly so if somebody accidentally unmutes themselves I can mute them,” she said, “but also it helps me to feel like I’m actually preaching to those people.”



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Associate Pastor Chrissy Westbury records for a virtual church service on Thursday, March 25, 2021 in Kalamazoo.

“It’s hard not see people” in person, Kelley acknowledged. “And there are some people we have found, who even with the phone option, are still not able to connect. So that’s an issue. And there are some people who don’t like the Zoom. They say, ‘It just doesn’t do anything for me.’ ”

There are people who feel the same at First Presbyterian, Weeldreyer said. But there also are people who say health concerns outweigh the downsides of online worship.

“An undercurrent in this whole thing is the levels of stress and anxiety among members anytime we have questions about: Are we going to open? Are we not going to open? How are we going to do this? How are we going to do that?” Weeldreyer said. “Everybody is anxious about getting sick or not wanting to make things worse for other people.”

But at the same time, he said, different people have different risk tolerances, so coming to consensus as a congregation with hundreds of members is stressful.

“Our power is very much a shared power situation,” he said. “We meet and we talk about it and we try to trust the wisdom of the Spirit as the group meets.

“But when the group does not agree -- and when there are strong differences that are exacerbated by all the other partisan stuff going on in our culture at the moment -- it makes it really hard because everything gets interpreted through that lens,” he said. “Our faith gets really tested. How do we build one another up in love when we’re anxious, and when we have strongly different opinions? That’s one of the biggest impacts that I have seen and felt.”

Yet another issue for churches this past year is the impact on community outreach and ministries.

Kelley said her church has had to revamp a program that offered non-food essential items such as toiletries and cleaning products, since most of her members involved in that program were senior citizens who have been quarantining. The church also suspended a program that involves visiting residents of a medical care facility who lack family.

Weeldreyer said that First Presbyterian always has prided itself on community outreach, and that’s been severely distributed by the pandemic.

“One thing that’s pretty distinctive about our congregation is that we have a lot of outside groups that use our building for meetings, and of course, that has not been able to happen,” he said.

The church also had a Wednesday night program that offered dinner to anyone who showed up. That’s been changed to offering takeout meals that are distributed outside the building, he said.

Both Weeldreyer and Kelley said they haven’t lost membership in their churches, and neither congregation has experienced a financial crisis because of the pandemic. But those have been issues in some congregations.



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A survey of U.S. Catholic bishops last summer by Georgetown University found a number expressing concerns about the financial implications of the pandemic.

“The most common area of concern is the missed weekend collections that the parishes have been unable to have due to not celebrating Masses publicly (or online only),” said a report on the [survey results](#). “Also parishioners’ financial health due to unemployment, a poor rural economy, or a great deal of poverty among parishioners. Other difficulties encountered include paying the salaries and wages of parish staffs.”

Likewise, almost half of U.S. Protestant pastors say their finances dropped in 2020, including 5% who say the downturn was significant, according to a November survey conducted by [Lifeway Research](#), which is based in Nashville.

And even in churches that had returned to in-person services, most pastors say their congregation has less than 70% of their pre-COVID crowds, Lifeway Research said.

Moreover, a Pew survey and [a survey by the Public Religion Research Institute](#) found that one-third or more of those who had previously attended church regularly were not bothering to watch online services.

There’s a sense the pandemic will have a long-term, permanent impact on religious institutions, experts say. But it’s still unclear exactly what that will mean.

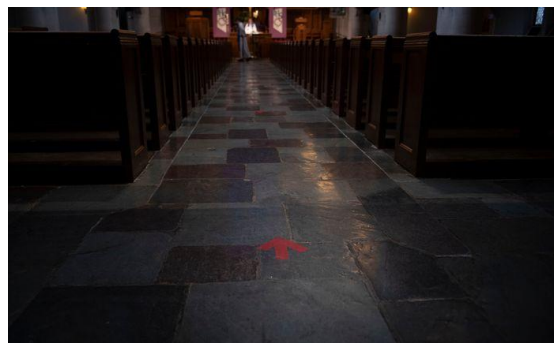
In response to the pandemic, many religious institutions initiated or expanded their social media presence, video capabilities and systems to allow members to pay their contributions online. Those changes are likely to stay in place, and some are likely to continue to livestream their worship services, now that they found a way to engage members who are homebound, snowbirds or who move away.

A bigger question is how the pandemic might impact the secularization of America, in which a growing sector of the population does not belong to a religious congregation. Now that many people are out of the habit of attending Sunday services in person, will the pandemic accelerate the trend of secularization? Or, conversely, will the pandemic make Americans put greater value on the sense of community that religious congregations can offer?

“It’s clear the assumptions of what it means to be church and how we do church will not be exactly the same as we go back,” Weeldreyer said. “Does that mean that people find, ‘Yeah I don’t need it. I can do without it.’ Sure.

“But that doesn’t mean other people will be searching for something more meaningful in life. That’s possible too,” he said. “I really think that’s a totally open question I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

What won’t change, Weeldreyer said, “is the fundamental identity of who we are. We’ll just keep trying to be that in new ways.”



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Arrows are taped onto the floor for social distancing of First Presbyterian Church on Thursday, March 25, 2021 in Kalamazoo. Pastor Seth Weeldreyer said they will resume in-person service on Easter Sunday while maintaining social distancing.