

CHURCH RESPONSE TO COVID-19

How Vermont UCC congregations worshipped, provided pastoral care, conducted stewardship, and more during the pandemic

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Introduction

During the month of July I worked as the Summer Pastoral Intern for the Northeast Association of the Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ. This work was conducted remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Reverends Alyssa May, Ed Sunday-Winters, and Elisa Lucozzi offered visionary leadership and mentorship for this unprecedented summer internship experience. I sincerely appreciate their willingness to craft a meaningful work experience and their creative support to create a valuable final product.

Over four weeks, I interviewed 23 individuals representing congregations across the state of Vermont. Most of those whom I interviewed were settled clergy in a congregational setting. I also interviewed a transitional minister, a retired clergy person, two members in discernment, and a few lay leaders. I am incredibly grateful to each person who spent time talking with me and answering my questions about how their church responded to COVID-19. A full listing of the names and affiliations of all research participants can be found in the appendix.

My research questions which I sent prior to each interview are as follows:

- How is Sunday worship conducted?
- Did you have to make changes to your Stewardship due to the pandemic?
- How are you providing pastoral care while social distancing?
- Two additional smaller topics of research include burnout (both clergy and lay leader) and church support of any feeding ministries in the community.

After my first few interviews, I also recognized some common themes and added a number of follow-up questions.

- Is your congregation doing any outdoor programming?
- How is the church building being used (if at all)?
- Are other churches in the area regathering in the sanctuary and is that impacting decisions your congregation is making?
- Do you feel connected to the Vermont Conference UCC? Are the resources they provide helpful to you and your ministry setting?

The goal of this report is to share the various ways that UCC congregations in Vermont, focusing primarily on the Northeast Kingdom region, responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Churches are livestreaming, broadcasting via public access television, and/or worshipping together via Zoom video conferencing. There are many different ways that congregations are “being the church” in this pandemic time.

While this report is focused on UCC congregations in Northeastern Vermont, I think that many of the reflections will be relevant to rural congregations across the United States.

I have focused the report on the five primary research questions that I outlined in my interviews. There were various bits and pieces from the interviews that didn't fit into one specific section and they are gathered in Section VI.

The report is formatted so that if you are most interested in one specific topic, like stewardship, you will be able to go directly to that section and draw from the reflections there.

This report is not a toolkit or a guide to regathering in sanctuaries. Nor do I provide specific guidance on how to safely reopen a church building.

I hope that readers of this report will feel affirmed in their ministry. People of faith are trying the best they can to safely worship God during these challenging times. The ways that we worship, provide pastoral care, conduct stewardship campaigns, and more have been modified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet there are glimmers of hope of a church finding renewed relevance in a world grappling with change.

Read on and be encouraged by the creative ways UCC congregations are finding to “be the church” today.

I would love to hear from you. Please email me and let me know what surprised you, what challenged you, what inspired you, or whatever else you would like to share.

Thank you for your interest and engagement with this research report.

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Section I. Sunday Worship

There are three primary categories of how Sunday worship is conducted for UCC congregations in the Northeast Association of the Vermont Conference UCC: email, Zoom, and pre-recorded video. At the time of my interviews, three congregations had resumed in-person worship. The congregations I interviewed who have resumed in-person worship are profiled at the end of this section.

Email Worship

Due to limited internet access or technological ability, five congregations that I spoke with are conducting worship via email. Worship services are sent out via email primarily and also hard copy in the mail to those without email. In one group of congregations sharing a minister, over thirty hard copies were being sent out each week. However, most churches utilizing this format seem to have a majority of their congregation on email with only a few hard copies being distributed. The emailed worship service doesn't not lend itself well to a traditional 12 to 15 minute sermon. There are creative solutions to this problem. Alyssa May, minister at Orleans Federated Church, modified her sermon into a Pastoral Letter and has been writing Pastoral Letters to her congregation for nearly twenty weeks. James Bound, pastor of The First Congregational Church of North Hyde Park, sends out worship via email and modifies his messages for the local newspaper so that the few members who do not have email receive a Sunday message as well.

Mary Hoadley, a Member in Discernment, did not let the pandemic keep her from serving God's people. She remained connected to a congregation where she provides regular pulpit supply by sending them a weekly email on Wednesdays, in addition to the Sunday worship service they received from other ministers. The Wednesday email newsletter provides a way for the congregation to hear a consistent pastoral voice and for her to offer a mid-week check-in to a congregation in transition. Mary's Wednesday emails also provide an opportunity to share more contemporary worship resources that might not fit into the congregation's regular Sunday worship.

Several congregations that were receiving worship by email gathered for prayer via conference call from Lent until June. One of the ministers who I spoke with said that the prayer calls were one of the biggest blessings of the past few months. She described her colleague who provided a thoughtful pastoral prayer each week and the blessing of a cacophony of voices praying the Lord's Prayer together.

Evelyn Coupe, serving the Lake Region Parish, shared two unique worship elements in her email worship service. Towards the beginning of the email worship she offers a "Whispering of the Spirit," which is a short inspirational quote. After her sermon or meditation, she added in a "Message of Hope," another quote that she intends for the congregation to be able to carry with them throughout the week.

Alyssa at Orleans Federated Church shared that they are planning to add once a month Zoom worship. And another church currently doing email worship will return to worship in their sanctuary in August.

Reflections from Laura on Email Worship

Email worship is one of the most creative ministries that I learned of in Northeastern Vermont. For rural congregations without good internet access, email worship is a wonderful way to remain connected. I first experienced email worship through Cleveland Park Congregational UCC in Washington DC when they utilized email worship as a way to take a sabbath from their regular weekly Zoom worship. For those who struggle with video chat overload and Zoom fatigue, Sunday worship service via email provides a way for the congregation to rest and disconnect.

A challenge faced by congregations who worship via email is continued engagement. Many congregations want to safely regather in person in the sanctuary. Supplementing email worship with safe outdoor gatherings or once a month Zoom worship can be sustainable alternatives.

Zoom Worship

Zoom is a very popular option for Sunday worship and is used in various ways. Many congregations gather together on Zoom as a way to see one another and worship together.

Some who are using Zoom live stream from the church sanctuary, while a few have set up their own home altar spaces.

Doug Carter at Danville Congregational utilizes Zoom for Sunday worship and shared that their attendance is close to the same as it would be in person. The congregation averages 20 to 30 devices attending Zoom worship live and about half of the devices have two people. He noted that they had a few people attend worship who had moved out of the area. Expanding worship attendance beyond the geographic area was a common remark I heard from many of those I interviewed. Online worship has provided an opportunity to reconnect with congregants who have moved away or are no longer able to attend in-person worship. Another pastor I spoke to said that he is intentionally inviting folks who have moved away or who live outside the state and have some connection to their congregation to participate in the worship service as liturgists. That pastor realized that different liturgists give the congregation new perspectives, instead of the congregation hearing the same voices all the time.

One congregation utilizes Zoom's webinar functionality (available with an upgraded account) in order to minimize risk and allow for accessibility with ASL interpretation.

Music is particularly challenging via Zoom. Many experimented with live music, but realized that Zoom is not conducive to streaming music and picking up instrumental sounds. Some adapted to live streaming worship via Zoom with pre-recording music.

Many of those whom I interviewed shared that they initially scaled back their order of worship at the beginning of the pandemic in mid-March to April. By the time of our conversations in July, they had added most worship elements back into the service. Ann Hockridge serving at Third Congregational Church in East St. Johnsbury and Lower Waterford added a new element to the worship service. She noticed that a centering time was important to add to the beginning of their Zoom worship. In traditional in-person worship, entering the sanctuary brings the congregation calm and peace. Adding a centering moment at the beginning of Zoom worship helps to focus attention. The centering moment concludes with a prayer to bless their virtual space.

Worshipping online brings new privacy concerns, especially with Zoom. It is important for clergy and church leaders to be mindful of what information is made publicly available. Prayer concerns are especially important to keep confidential within the congregation.

Scott Couper at Centre Church in Brattleboro shared that two blessings have come from their transition to Zoom worship. The first is the ability to utilize audio visuals during the sermon. Their sanctuary does not have a projector or way to display PowerPoint. Now on Zoom he can share a PowerPoint with images and other visuals during the sermon. The second blessing for him has been the creation a Worship Planning committee. Previously worship planning was solely the pastor's responsibility. Scott now has a small group of church members who help him each week in planning for the worship service. They also reflect after the worship service about what went well and what could be improved.

Greensboro UCC is not using Zoom for live worship, but they do gather after worship for coffee hour each week on Zoom. Ed Sunday-Winters is the minister at Greensboro and he shared that they are using YouTube Live for Sunday worship. Greensboro UCC has a church volunteer with video experience who helps to do live video transitions between multiple camera angles. Ed said that one blessing has been people in his congregation came and taped their pictures into the pews where they would normally sit. At first it happened organically and then on Easter Sunday Ed invited his congregation to add a picture of whoever they would bring with them for Easter worship. So even though the congregation has not worshipped in the sanctuary together for more than 20 weeks, Ed doesn't feel like he is alone on Sunday mornings.

Reflections from Laura on Zoom Worship

Obviously one of the best things about Zoom worship is the ability to see the congregation face-to-face. Zoom worship allows the congregation to remain connected to each other. I have heard from ministerial colleagues that a challenge of worship during the pandemic has been feeling performative. I think that Zoom worship can feel very authentic when it is being done live and not pre-recorded. I heard from several clergy who felt that Zoom worship provided the best way for the congregation to be vulnerable with one another when praying joys and concerns.

Another concern with Zoom worship can be internet or other technological capabilities. What happens if you lose power or your computer isn't working on Sunday morning? It is probably a good idea to have co-hosts and a back-up plan in case of any internet problems.

Pre-recorded Worship

Most of the UCC congregations that I interviewed outside of the Northeast Association are pre-recording their worship services. However, only one congregation I spoke with in the Northeast Association is pre-recording Sunday worship. James Merriam at United Church of Newport shared that they are pre-recording worship on Thursday mornings. Their main focus for Sunday worship has been distribution of their recorded worship on Public Access Television. James shared that he felt fortunate to have pre-established relationships with the local public access group so the church's slots were already scheduled before the pandemic. Beginning in July, United Church of Newport added a midweek Bible Study/Devotional when they were able to secure another slot on the Public Access Network, NEK-TV. The recorded Sunday worship and Bible Study is also available via YouTube.

Kevin Goldenbogen, Senior Pastor at Charlotte Congregational Church, shared that they transitioned from live Zoom worship into pre-recorded worship which is livestreamed on Sunday mornings. Kevin emphasized how important it was to him and the church to keep their musicians employed. Pre-recorded videos allow for higher quality music and incorporation of different lay liturgists. He did acknowledge that the pre-recorded format takes more work. Kevin spends a lot of time matching the audio levels and sound quality for all of the different video clips. He expressed appreciation for his staff who are very technologically capable. Similar to United Church of Newport, Charlotte Congregational Church has added a Wednesday prayer service during the pandemic time.

At First Congregational Church of Essex Junction, Associate Pastor Josh Simon shared that a new tool helped them mix pre-recorded elements and livestream Sunday worship. The church purchased a subscription to Wirecast in order to have a software system that is designed for livestreaming. Most of the worship service is live on Sunday mornings from the church sanctuary. Wirecast allows them to mix in pre-recorded music and other elements of

the worship service. Josh shared that the making of music videos required a lot of time. He adds lyrics and pictures to music that has been recorded in musician's homes.

One challenge to livestreaming worship can be the lack of interaction for clergy leading the worship service. The Congregational Church of Middlebury UCC is able to engage with the congregation during the livestream because all of the elements of the worship service are pre-recorded. Andi Lloyd, a member in discernment in the congregation, feels that creating the worship video is her way of staying connected to the congregation. All of the pieces of the worship service are sent to Andi Friday night or Saturday morning and then she stitches them all together Saturday afternoon. On Sunday morning the worship service video premieres on Facebook Live and everyone can comment and engage with each other on Facebook.

Reflections from Laura on Pre-Recorded Worship

Pre-recorded worship eliminates most of the technological concerns. The only remaining concern is the format of how to premiere a worship video, usually on Facebook or YouTube. I enjoy the ability to see others watching and engaging in the comments on Facebook Live videos. However, some people don't use Facebook and using that for the primary Sunday worship format can exclude part of the congregation.

An interesting side effect I have seen from pre-recorded worship is the ability of some ministers to be in two places at once! I have a clergy friend who provided pulpit supply at two different churches on Sunday morning in different parts of the state.

Another challenge of pre-recorded worship is the time it takes to weave multiple video clips together and possibly record multiple takes of videos. This type of worship requires someone who is tech-savvy and enjoys working on this format of worship.

Regathered in the Sanctuary

Three congregations that I interviewed had resumed in-person Sunday worship during the month of July when I was conducting my research.

Kim Larose is the minister at United Church of Craftsbury. She shared that from late March to mid-June Sunday worship was pre-recorded and primarily sent out via email. Her congregation decided to re-gather in the sanctuary beginning in mid-June. Before coronavirus, they usually had 30 to 40 people attending in person on a Sunday morning. Since re-opening,

they have generally had about 15 people attending in person. All congregants wear masks and social distance. After conducting worship on Sunday morning, Kim delivers hard copies of the service to about 15 people.

I spoke with a lay leader from Second Congregational Church in Hyde Park who shared that they had regathered in the sanctuary at the beginning of July. They have two congregations who conduct a joint worship service and share a minister. Attendance is around twenty and the space where they are worshipping allows for individual chairs set up six feet apart. The lay leader shared that most people are not attending church in person, but are watching the livestream on Facebook. However, there were concerns about video quality and technical difficulties.

United Church of Hardwick also re-gathered in their sanctuary at the beginning of July. Evelyn Lavelli, their minister, shared that they have about twenty in person attendees. Prior to the pandemic, attendance was about 30 to 35 people. Evelyn tries to keep the service around 45 minutes with everyone social distancing and wearing masks. They have modified the way they collect prayers as a congregation with a prayer basket instead of a bulletin board.

Reflections from Laura on Worship in the Sanctuary

I know that I am eager for the day when it is safe to return to worship in the sanctuary. Congregations of a smaller size might be able to safely return to worship in the sanctuary sooner than larger congregations. It is clear that returning to the sanctuary will not be going “back to normal.” The clergy who I interviewed who had regathered in their sanctuary did not make the decision on their own and were not bullied by the congregation. True to denominational polity, the decision to reopen a sanctuary was usually aided by committees or task forces. These committees also helped to determine the policies and procedures the congregation would follow.

I think it is very important for congregations that are worshipping again in the sanctuary to provide a viable option for those who are not able to or do not want to attend in person. I think that some congregations are holding off on regathering in person for this reason. It can be challenging to record or livestream worship during in person worship.

Final Thoughts on Sunday Worship

All styles of worship are good! One minister I spoke with shared his realization that the congregation could tune into any church in the world on Sunday morning. The reason a congregant was watching was not because the church had the best produced worship. It was because the congregant wanted to remain connected to their community. I hope the different styles of worship documented here empower clergy in the style of worship they are leading.

Many of the pastors I interviewed were happy about an unintended side effect of the transition to online worship. They realized they could easily experiment with different worship elements. Mark Blank, pastor at Second Congregational Church Bennington, shared that he added a Social Justice Moment to the worship service each week. The Social Justice Moment is a way to talk about the history of racism, local partnerships, and other justice issues each Sunday. If you are feeling creative and want to try something new, this is a great time to do it. If you are feeling overwhelmed and just want to stick to the basics, that is okay too!

Section II. Stewardship

Most of the clergy and lay leaders I spoke with expressed how grateful they are that, as of July, most parishioners are still able to fulfill their pledges. In the Northeast Association of the Vermont Conference UCC, churches are generally relying on members to regularly mail in their checks, with some members going as far as hand delivering them (with appropriate safety precautions, such as masks).

While many churches experienced a small dip in giving at the beginning of the pandemic, most explained that they were generally staying on budget for the year. More than one church said that they were actually doing better financially than one year ago. One of the clergy that I spoke with shared that someone in her congregation encouraged other church members of the church to consider tithing part of their stimulus payments.

Many of the congregations in the Northeast Association host Christmas or Holiday Bazaars as major fundraisers for their churches and communities. In July when I was conducting interviews only one congregation was actively making alternate plans regarding how to reinvent their Holiday Bazaar. Orleans Federated Church is planning to hold their Holiday Bazaar as an outdoor fall festival with a tent so that it can take place rain or shine. Most of the primary elements of the fundraiser are planned to still take place: pre-ordering holiday wreaths, a quilt raffle, gift basket raffles, and food for purchase available for take-out (soup, bread, and donuts).

Danville Congregational Church modified their largest fundraiser, a Time and Talent dinner and auction, by utilizing an online auction website (<https://www.32auctions.com/>). The congregation was able to bring in about half of the budgeted fundraising amount through their virtual auction. They felt like the online auction was a success and are considering scheduling another online auction for the fall.

At least one congregation is worried about loss of rental income. Some congregations expressed that their worries were slightly relieved from receiving PPP loans. Several clergy expressed concern about how much of those loans would turn into grants and how the forgiveness of PPP loans could impact their future financial health as a congregation.

United Church of Hardwick normally brings in about \$6000 annually through a thrift shop that operates out of the church. The thrift shop was closed from March until the end of June. They have reopened with precautions in place and hope to be able to raise some funds for the remainder of the year and to serve the community through the thrift shop. The thrift shop also serves as a community service by providing clothes by the bag to those in need. Orleans Federated Church normally holds a rummage sale in May, but it was cancelled this year. Their rummage sale typically serves as a small fundraiser bringing in about \$500 and serves as a missional activity by also providing access to clothing by the bag for those in need.

Congregations lacking settled clergy leadership or otherwise in transition were more concerned with unfulfilled pledges and anticipated feeling the loss of even small fundraisers, like pie sales.

Some congregations saw the pandemic as a time to be creative and try new fundraising opportunities. In late July, Greensboro UCC held a to-go quiche sale and raised over \$550 for Hardwick Food Pantry. They sold out of the quiches in less than a half hour. One congregant wrote, "It felt good to be working together for a good cause."

Many of the clergy and lay leaders I spoke with expressed disappointment over the disconnect they felt related to their regular missional giving, like the UCC Five for Five (especially One Great Hour of Sharing and the Strengthen the Church offerings) and other special collections. It seemed that many congregations who are traditionally very faithful in participating in the UCC Five for Five had not done any special collections from March to July 2020.

The transition to email and other virtual worship services has extended the reach of many rural Vermont congregations. Some churches are beginning to consider how to include their extended network in financially supporting the church. One minister suggested a "Friends of the Congregation" drive and is trying to envision how to make a personal appeal to friends across the country who are tuning into worship with her Northeast Vermont congregation.

Spending habits have changed during the pandemic, especially as businesses encourage customers to use credit cards instead of cash due to concerns of spreading the virus. United Community Church in St. Johnsbury has often collected a Noisy Offering where children bring in

spare change. The kids are able to choose where the Noisy Offering is donated. As of this report in July 2020, there are recent news updates about coin shortages across the country and banks possibly paying customers to turn in coins. Noisy Offering and coin collection could be a possible creative fundraising opportunity for congregations in the future.

Other ideas from across Vermont

Centre Church in Brattleboro is considering using this pandemic as an opportunity to improve financial transparency. The congregation has remained faithful financially by fulfilling pledges. Their minister Scott Couper wants to start including financial updates in weekly newsletters showing week to week and year to date financial pictures so that every member of the church will know where the congregation stands financially.

An ongoing fundraiser for Waitsfield UCC has seen additional support during the stay-at-home time. The church has a shed onsite for bottle and can collection. Recently, they collected more than 14,000 cans and bottles in one week. With more people eating and drinking at home there are more cans and bottles to donate to the church. A quick estimation calculates that this fundraiser could bring in \$700 a week to the church.

Kevin Goldenbogen, senior pastor of Charlotte Congregational Church, is considering what a stewardship campaign will look like in the midst of this pandemic. He recognizes that they have some large upcoming technological upgrades they will need to make. Kevin has a visionary approach to stewardship and shares, "I think that we have done an incredible job [as a church] caring, feeding, and connecting. We have an awesome story to tell. We have to be intentional in communicating to our community how we support each other. In some ways, the stewardship campaign story has already been written."

Section III. Pastoral Care

For many ministers, worship on Sunday morning traditionally provides the best opportunity to check in on how members of their congregation are doing. With worship services being conducted remotely, clergy relied heavily on phone calls to keep in touch with their members. Each minister has their own agreement with their congregation regarding how much of their time is regularly spent on pastoral care. I spoke with ministers who estimated anywhere from 10% to 50% of their total time was spent on pastoral care.

Most ministers shared that at the beginning of the pandemic, from March to May, they spent more time than usual on pastoral care. Several clergy shared a similar reflection: “As pastors we are used to worrying about a few families in our congregation. But we aren’t used to having to worry about everyone.” The pastoral care needs of so many in the congregation have led to concerns regarding clergy burn out (addressed in Section IV). One minister named this experience of burning out from caring for so many in their congregation as “compassion fatigue.”

Some congregations already had systems in place for deacons or another group in the church to formally check on and pray for members of the congregation. One congregation split up their church directory and each deacon took a few pages to regularly call folks.

Another minister saw this pandemic as an opportunity to update their outdated church directory. She was regularly sending out letters via postal mail and email. Working with the church administrator, she was able to update incorrect emails or addresses. Her goal in updating the church directory was to remove the minister and church administrator as gatekeeper of church member contact information so the congregation will be able to contact each other directly.

Clergy had mixed feelings about porch visits. The porch visits might be the best way to see home bound congregants, but some church members didn’t respect boundaries and wouldn’t wear face masks and even approached ministers for a hug. Another minister shared that he had conducted some porch visits and backyard visits around a bonfire, but he realized that, even when he had the best intentions to social distance, it was too easy to unintentionally break social distancing. Often church members wanted to show hospitality by offering nuts or

crackers and pastors felt uncomfortable refusing or accidentally accepted and later realized they “broke the rules.”

One minister recognized that they were doing the best they could, but it doesn’t always feel like enough. Another realized that her congregation was doing a great job checking in on each other and she didn’t need to stress about creating a formalized list to check in on everyone.

A unique source of pastoral care is a Faith Community Nurse on staff at United Community Church, St. Johnsbury. This position became especially relevant due to health concerns during the pandemic. The Faith Community Nurse was able to call on a number of parishioners up to two times per week at the beginning of the pandemic and had transitioned to once a week by July.

For the congregation that is physically active and enjoys spending time outside, one minister was meeting congregants for walks and checking in with folks that way. Another creative idea was a pastor who delivered small pots of flowers to her congregation with a note saying, “May we continue to grow together, even in this time apart.”

Four months into this pandemic, phone calls remained an important way of providing pastoral care. Many clergy also mentioned card ministries, supported by clergy or lay leaders.

Reflections from Laura on Pastoral Care

It is important for clergy to clarify what they have the bandwidth for and what brings them joy in ministry. For clergy who enjoy doing pastoral care check-ins, keep doing them. If pastoral care is something that you constantly feel guilty about, invest the time upfront to create a system and train your congregation to provide care for each other.

Similar to other ministries, pastoral care is being provided in new and unique formats due to the pandemic. Caring for the congregation is more important than ever and hopefully clergy and lay leaders are able to find a format that works for their congregation.

Section IV. Clergy Burnout

“In April, I realized I don’t know how much longer I can do this...”

“I feel easily distracted, irritated, and feel a deep grief for the state of the world.”

“A few weeks ago I said, I don’t want to do this anymore.”

“I did burnout. The exhaustion and work load overwhelmed me.”

“I’ve been preaching for 35 years and nothing prepared me for this.”

“This level of uncertainty feels burdensome, difficult, and unwieldy.”

Clergy burnout is an incredibly important research topic. I don’t view it as a minor topic, yet I realize it is a bigger topic than I had the ability to cover within my one month of interviews. I hope that in the future there is more research done regarding clergy burnout and the impact of the pandemic. For my research, it felt important to at least check-in with clergy about burnout. Several interviewees shared with me that they were grateful for the chance to process and reflect on their ministry experiences.

The quotes shared above are directly from my interviews with clergy across the state of Vermont. The general tone throughout most of the interviews was upbeat and positive. Those who I interviewed were happy to be sharing what their church had been doing and how they had adapted to ministry in this season. When conversations turned to burnout, I received a glimpse into the struggles clergy are facing in this pandemic.

The excerpted quotes are challenging and difficult to read. I hope that they are comforting to other clergy. You are not the only one going through this challenging experience! One clergyperson I interviewed specifically mentioned how the Tuesday Vermont Conference UCC clergy check-ins helped her to realize that she was not alone and other clergy were facing similar struggles.

A common theme in my interviews was the steep learning curve clergy faced at the beginning of the pandemic. Most of the congregations that I interviewed were not previously livestreaming worship or doing much church work over Zoom, especially in Northeastern Vermont.

Pastors were learning Zoom, Mailchimp, and other new forms of technology first-hand and then trying to quickly teach members of their congregation how to use the various platforms. For one minister I interviewed the technology and other changes to ministry were

overwhelming and she recognized she had burnt out. Fortunately, the minister was able to take one month of leave, but the technological challenges remain.

Some clergy expressed frustration with what one person described as, “fatigue of explaining over and over again why we aren’t doing in-person worship.” All of the clergy I spoke with recognized the deep yearning felt in congregations to re-gather for worship. However, each clergy person is navigating the re-gathering conversation in a different way.

Part of the concern regarding burnout is the lack of feedback that many clergy are receiving in this time. I heard from several ministers about how they were struggling with not being able to see their congregation due to the way they were worshipping online. One minister shared, “At some point in June I started to realize, this is the long haul. That helped me to reframe how we will make our way through.” Another minister realized that he needed to reinstate boundaries around work time and his personal life.

With all of the challenges clergy face in ministry during the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone I spoke with mentioned ways they try to perform self-care. Prayer life, daily walks, and swims are just some of the ways clergy recharged. One pastor shared, “I know that I can’t help other people if my well is dry.”

In July when I was conducting the interviews many clergy recognized they had entered a different phase in their ministry, a “shift from crisis phase to maintenance phase.” One minister described the change as “learning to live with grief. Grief can be a companion that doesn’t consume you. We can learn to live with change.”

Overall, 75% of the clergy I interviewed had taken or have plans to take vacation sometime over the summer or into the fall. Clergy, like many across the United States, were grappling with adjusting travel plans when it was difficult to leave Vermont and facing the challenges of not being able to visit with family.

Travel might be uncertain, yet many are being nourished by dreaming about where they will go when it is safe. Some examples include: Green Mountain Monastery, a family cabin in Canada, the ocean, Taizé in France, and to visit family in North Carolina.

One minister I spoke with who was apprehensive at first about planning two weeks of stay-at-home vacation found the time away from the pulpit refreshing. He shared that it

seemed too overwhelming to try to find virtual pulpit supply and didn't have the ability to do extra work and pre-record worship services himself. His creative solution was to direct his congregation to watch worship at one of four different UCC congregations across the country during the two weeks he was on vacation. His congregation enjoyed the experience. It also helped him as a minister to realize how many resources are out there for his own spiritual nourishment.

Section V. Feeding Ministries

Similar to clergy burnout, feeding ministries are not a small topic and are beyond the scope of what I could reasonably cover in a limited period of time. However, many congregations dedicated additional time and energy into feeding programs during the COVID-19 pandemic and it felt important to document some of that work.

Interestingly, many congregations recognized that even while they were assembling additional resources around food, there were many other programs taking place at the same time. In Vermont, there were several sites across the state where the National Guard distributed food. Several clergy mentioned that they had not yet seen a significant uptick in their local food shelf and they attributed this to the government direct financial assistance that was working. Many congregations saw their role as preparing for when the federal government assistance was no longer there. They were ready for future need in their local communities.

James Merriam at United Church in Newport shared their church has grown their food shelf over the past few years. The food bank offered them a grant, dropped their food prices, and opened up a wider variety of items. At United Church of Newport they increased their availability for the food shelf. They used to be open only two days a month. The church had previously offered a community meal and they tried one as entirely take out; they later put the community meal on hold because of safety concerns.

United Community Church in St. Johnsbury also tried to offer to-go versions of their community meals, however they also put the program on hold due to the new safety protocols. Danville Congregational Church previously offered a monthly community meal and determined that transitioning to an entirely take out option would be too complicated.

While the new safety protocols might be too overwhelming for one congregation, several communities had banded together to continue to provide meal services, though it usually relied on volunteers from outside of the congregation. United Church of Craftsbury hosted a monthly community dinner that transitioned into a weekly soup pick up or delivery. The transition was accomplished through the support of a Neighbor to Neighbor Task Force that was created at the beginning of the pandemic in mid-March. The central location of the

church allows them to host various pick-ups and drop offs for the community group, such as masks and other supplies.

Another congregation that increased their food distribution is Orleans Federated Church. They previously offered only a monthly food distribution and increased to weekly during the pandemic. They also added produce distribution once a week; this served as a way for farmers to offload produce that was not going to restaurants or other customers. The additional food distribution has led to a critical volunteer shortage. Even two more volunteers would make a huge difference in the sustainability of the program. Pastor Alyssa May shared, “This feels like the place where our mission as a church meets the world. We hope to continue to develop this program because this ministry helps us to connect with our neighbors.”

Neighbors share with one another at a small food shelf created at Greensboro UCC. Ed Sunday-Winters said that his congregation created a food share shelf, similar to a Little Free Library, where folks can drop off what they have to share and take what they need. Greensboro UCC, along with several other congregations I interviewed, also offers vouchers for local stores in their village for food or gas. A few congregations also offer assistance with paying for bills, like gas, electric, oil and water.

While requests for assistance have not been substantial yet, church leadership was preparing for a greater need in the future. They anticipate that this will be a difficult fall and winter if direct federal financial assistance ends. Churches are preparing to help their community both in the short-term and the long-term.

Section VI. Additional Insights

Some ideas shared didn't fit into the other categories, yet I felt should be included in this report due to how they showcase creative ministry in a pandemic. This section is a round-up of reflections about unique ways to "be the church" in the time of COVID-19.

Fresh coat of paint

At United Church of Newport there was a volunteer effort to give the physical church building a little TLC while it is not regularly being utilized. Small groups who were able to social distance repainted almost all of the interior rooms in the church building. They also stripped and waxed the floors. A new children's corner was created in the back of sanctuary and the church library was redecorated. Martha Peck, a retired UCC minister, shared that taking a breather from the physical church space allowed everyone to approach the rooms with fresh eyes. She expressed, "the church is experiencing a renewed sense of relevance in this time."

Reclaiming part of the summer

With so many summer camps cancelled, Pastor Elliott Munn wanted to provide a fun experience for the children in Vergennes. The Congregational Church of Vergennes offered a new summer ministry program for kids in grades kindergarten to fourth. The program, called "Little Blossoms," offers crafts, games, Bible stories and lunch. Held under a tent with masks required, Little Blossoms created a joyful experience for kids who had lost many of their traditional summer programs.

Elliott also created an adult program for the congregation called "I love to tell the story." Each week there were prompts for small group discussion and no necessary preparatory work. The small groups met outside and attendees shared that they enjoyed the time to share and talk. "I love to tell the story" participants said that they were learning things about each other that they had never known even after attending church together for decades. The program was also helpful for Elliott as a newly called minister to get to safely meet his congregation and hear important stories.

Essential Facilities

Greensboro UCC happens to have the only public restroom in their village. While the rest of the church building is closed, they have kept the restroom in their fellowship hall open.

Ed Sunday-Winters jokingly shared, “I don’t think we should turn people away in their moment of greatest need!” There is a sign on the restroom door that states the restroom is professionally cleaned only once a week. Cleaning supplies are provided and it is recommended to anyone who wants to use the restroom clean the surfaces before and after use.

One other community service being provided through the church space is free internet. A tenant of Greensboro UCC, WonderArts, moved their internet from their basement office up into the church bell tower. They set up the internet so they are able to provide free public Wi-Fi from the church building.

Summary

Over four weeks in July 2020, I interviewed 23 individuals representing congregations across the state of Vermont. My research focused primarily on the congregations in the Northeast Association of the Vermont Conference UCC.

How is Sunday worship conducted?

- Email, Zoom, and pre-recorded video are the three primary ways Sunday worship is being conducted.
- Technological concerns were prevalent, yet the transition to digital ministry allowed for incredible creativity.
- Three congregations had resumed in-person worship in their sanctuary, as of July 2020.

Were changes made to Stewardship due to the pandemic?

- Most congregations were staying on budget for the year.
- Special offerings and denominational giving, like the UCC Five for Five, had not been regularly collected during the pandemic.
- Some major fundraising events were being adapted to online fundraisers or outdoor social distanced activities.

How is pastoral care provided while social distancing?

- Most ministers shared that at the beginning of the pandemic, from March to May, they spent more time than usual on pastoral care.
- Phone calls became a primary way to conduct pastoral care and some clergy conducted porch visits.
- Other creative forms of pastoral care were card ministries, meeting congregants for walks outside, and dropping off small gifts.

Are clergy at risk of burnout?

- Clergy recognized a steep learning curve at the beginning of the pandemic that could have led to burnout. By July, many clergy had “shift[ed] from crisis phase to maintenance phase” in their ministry.
- Taking time off for vacation remains an important way for clergy to avoid burning out. Regular self-care practices are incredibly valuable when traveling is not possible.
- One minister identified “compassion fatigue,” similar to burnout, as a problem he faced.

How are local feeding ministries impacted?

- Most churches who provided community meals have put them on hold due to the new health and safety protocols required.
- Church leadership are preparing for a greater need in the future. Direct assistance from the federal government kept local food shelves from being overwhelmed from March to July.
- Some congregations created partnerships with local community organizations and farmers in order to provide additional food distributions.

Appendix: List of Churches and Contact Information

I am so grateful to each person who spent time talking and sharing with me about how their congregation responded to COVID-19. If there is something in this report that interested you and you would like to follow up with someone directly, everyone listed below agreed to share their contact information.

Northeast Association of the Vermont Conference UCC

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Elisa Lucozzi, Pastor (until August 31, 2020), United Community Church St. Johnsbury. unitedcommunitychurchucc@gmail.com
Alyssa May, Pastor, Orleans Federated Church. vtrevam@hotmail.com
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Gail Robitaille, Member, Westmore Community Church.
Ed Sunday-Winters, Pastor, Greensboro United Church of Christ. edsundaywinters@gmail.com
Barbara Thompson, Member, Brownington Congregational Church.

Across the Vermont Conference UCC

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