

## Pivoting During the Pandemic

by Elizabeth Blackwell

Backyard baptisms. Online children's storytime. A "Blessing of the Devices" to kick off the school year. Fellowship groups gathering around bonfires (fully masked, of course). Throughout First Church, congregants and staff have found creative ways to continue their work despite the Covid pandemic. While shifting to this new normal has been challenging for everyone, many have discovered a new appreciation for rituals they previously took for granted.

When all in-person church activities were shut down in March, the most pressing concerns were technical: How do we live-stream a service? Who has a Zoom account? Over the following months, church leaders had to confront deeper questions. What's our core mission, and how can we find a new way to fulfill it?

For the Children's and Youth ministries, the focus was on keeping kids and their families involved—in whatever way



First Church's 99th Annual Christmas Pageant will air during virtual worship this Sunday at 10:30 a.m. Although we will miss watching the herd of sheep huddle together, we have a unique opportunity to share the wonder of the pageant tradition with the broader public. *2019 Pageant photo by Frank Montagna.*

possible. "We had to find new ways of connecting," says Judith Campbell, chair of Children's Council. Colin McDonald took over as Director of Children's Ministry on June 1 and immediately stepped up to the challenge. He started a Wednesday evening online story time (so kids were occupied while their parents fixed dinner) and made socially distant visits to families to personally invite them to this summer's virtual Vacation Bible School. "He was the best possible person for this particular time," says Campbell.

The annual Christmas Pageant may be virtual this year, but Campbell says it may be more meaningful than ever. "It's not about having a big show," she says. "It's about the kids and bringing families together. The work they're all doing is way beyond what I ever could have imagined." Children's Council is also developing a program for children to exchange postcards with older members of the congregation. In the spirit of the hymn, Campbell says "it's a way to carry the flame from one generation to another."

### Inside This Issue

- **Pastor Bonny offers 10 ideas for healthy faithfulness**
- **Christmas Eve Worship**
- **Christmas gifts that do good**
- **Meet our new members**



Rev. Bonny Roth

This Advent is like none other during our lifetimes. The pandemic has paused many of our routines and traditions. Even with creatively-crafted bypasses, our days unfold without familiar forms. As we experience Advent waiting, perhaps more consciously than ever, we may open ourselves anew to God’s claim on our lives. These ideas come with the hope that you may experience improved health and renewed faith, both of which allow you to serve others more faithfully.

**Participate in community**

One community we share is First Church, our faith community. Participate in worship each week by watching and listening to our worship service at 10:30 a.m. The service is available after the premier; however, setting your clock for the premier allows you to send and receive greetings in the Chat section of YouTube. Other people need you as much as you need them.

# Advent Waiting: 10 Ideas for Healthy Faithfulness

By Bonny Roth

**Commit to daily devotional time**

The website of The United Methodist Church ([umc.org](http://umc.org)) contains extensive resources, including weekly Advent devotions. Embedded within the devotions and other website content are links to concepts and organizations that may be unfamiliar and informative.

The website of the UMC Upper Room ([upperroom.org](http://upperroom.org)) offers daily devotionals and prayers, along with a wealth of resources for growing our faith through prayer.

**Read weekly worship scripture**

Our First Church weekly e-news lists the worship scripture that will be sung, preached, and prayed during the upcoming worship service. Reading these scriptures several times before worship helps us prepare for our worship experiences.

**Watch free webinar on coping with stress**

Through the UMC website you may register for a four-series webinar on coping with stress during this season and beyond. Sessions are scheduled for Tuesdays and Thursdays, December 1 and 3, and 8 and 10 at 2:00 p.m. You may register for any or all of the sessions.

**Mark time with an Advent wreath**

We don’t need a circle of greenery or matching candles. Gather five candles of any size, color, shape. Arrange them in a line or a circle. Designate one as the Christ candle to be lighted on Christmas Day. Light the other four, add them one by one, as each week of Advent arrives.

**Pray for others**

Pray for someone each day. Begin the day by lifting someone into the light of God’s love. Simply tell God “Thank you” for that person and ask God to be present with them. Call them by name throughout the day so that you and God focus on their wellbeing. You could

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*As this issue is finalized, Rev. Grace Imathiu is traveling back to Evanston after spending a few weeks with her parents in Meru, Kenya. Our prayers continue for Pastor Grace and the Imathiu family as they grieve the death of her brother Paul.*

# Christmas Worship and Music

## CHRISTMAS EVE, DEC. 24

4:00-4:45 p.m. All Ages Christmas Eve Service. An interactive and spirited service for all ages.

7:00-8:00 p.m. Virtual Christmas Eve Service. Festive prelude begins at 6:30 p.m.

11:30 - midnight. Christmas Eve Service live-streamed from Tittle Chapel.

## CHRISTMAS DAY, DEC. 25

10:30 a.m. Carol Sing on Zoom

## SUNDAY, DEC. 27

10:30 a.m. Service of Lessons and Carols

All services are online. The internet links will be communicated in the weekly e-news and on the church's homepage at [www.faithatfirst.com](http://www.faithatfirst.com).



Christmas Eve Worship 2019



*First United Methodist Church is a community of Christians inviting all people to grow in their relationship with God and to live their faith in the world.*



## Advent Waiting: 10 Ideas for Healthy Faithfulness

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even communicate with that person by phone, email, text to offer your loving care.

Pray for First Church—its ministries within and beyond our congregation. Ask God’s presence with our leaders, volunteers, Inquirers, Confirmands, and all who serve God’s beloved children.

### Make a Gratitude Jar

Evanston’s Senior Services offers a wealth of information, including a monthly newsletter and Brain Break Activity Packet. One newsletter item—certainly not age-limited—describes how to make and use a Gratitude Jar. Barbara, who with her husband contributed the idea, is

participating in our First Church Inquirers process.

If you or someone you know would like to subscribe to the packet directly, please call 847-448-4311 to complete the request for the Brain Break Activity Packet or [complete the request online](#).

### Expand your mind and spirit

Explore the opportunities for Adult Christian Education and Faith Formation described in our e-news. These Zoom opportunities allow you to study and talk from your home. Contact Mitchell Jackson ([mitchell@faithatfirst.com](mailto:mitchell@faithatfirst.com)) and Pastor Bonny ([bonny@faithatfirst.com](mailto:bonny@faithatfirst.com)), with questions.

### Give and receive support

Throughout the pandemic the Stay-at-Home Support Group has met by Zoom every Sunday morning at 9:15 a.m. Email [bethswanick@gmail.com](mailto:bethswanick@gmail.com) for the link.

### Reach out to our clergy team

Our three clergy welcome opportunities to share your joys and concerns:

Rev. Grace Imathiu, Senior Pastor

[grace@faithatfirst.com](mailto:grace@faithatfirst.com)

Rev. Jane Cheema, Pastor of Discipleship and Mission  
[jane@faithatfirst.com](mailto:jane@faithatfirst.com)

Rev. Bonny Roth, Pastor of Pastoral Care and Faith Formation,  
[bonny@faithatfirst.com](mailto:bonny@faithatfirst.com)



FUMC STEWARDSHIP  
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FAITH, VOICE AND BLESSINGS.



## Stewardship Update

As of December 11 we have 182 pledges in hand totaling \$954,320 toward the 2021 First Church operating budget.

The Stewardship Committee continues to follow up with calls and emails to member households that have not yet pledged.

You may pledge online at <http://faithatfirst.com/2021pledge/> or return your completed 2021 pledge card by mail to First UMC, 516 Church Street, Evanston, IL 60201.

Questions? Please contact Candi Boutwell, Church Business Administrator, at [candi@faithatfirst.com](mailto:candi@faithatfirst.com) or leave a phone message at 847-864-6181 x214.

## New Members Join and Connect Virtually

On Dec. 6, 2020, this congregation received new members virtually for the first time as 12 individuals took First Church membership vows during a Zoom gathering witnessed by 50 persons in the congregation. During a time of great suffering, loss, and uncertainty, it is rather extraordinary to have any new members join a church.

Although it was not the usual in-person and in the sanctuary new member liturgy we are used to, one church member described the Zoom new member reception as “heartwarming.” The flexibility of the online format allowed Pastor Grace to lead from Meru, Kenya, new member Todd Kibbey to participate from Solider Field (where he was working at the Bears game that day), and the new members to receive a special blessing from Bishop Lawi Imathiu (Pastor Grace’s father, also in Meru).

This group of new members participated in a completely online Inquirers Class this fall. They have begun and continue to make connections with the faith community virtually. (Meet them on page 9).

For two new members, the move to online programming played a key role in their decision to pursue membership. New member Marlyse Wiebenga has never been inside the First Church building. A resident of Portage Park, she first attended virtual worship in late April, when church member Nancy Pen-dergrass spotted her name on Face-



book and posted a welcome comment. Then Wiebenga was invited to Limitless, the fellowship group that had begun hosting Thursday game nights on Zoom. Her experiences with Limitless and other online small groups later on helped her feel that she had found a church home.

Amanda Cacich began attending First Church worship in March 2019 when she lived in Wilmette. But when she moved farther south and west, she didn’t know if continuing to attend (without access to a car) was feasible. But while sheltering in place last spring she was able to attend worship online and able to step up her involvement in the Limitless group. Like Wiebenga, Cacich became Zoom game night regular.

New members Robert Harris and Jake and Savannah Hemminger, each with a professional music and/or music education background, were

initially attracted to First Church because of the worship music, and all three have been involved in music ministry during the pandemic. New members Dianne and Todd Kibbey and Katy Clusen (along with her spouse Laurie Moses) visited First Church specifically looking for a youth program for their teenage daughters — and stayed having found spiritual food for themselves as well.

Two other new member couples, Don and Vanessa Bender and Tom and Sally Jacob, relocated to this area in their retirement to live near their adult children and grandchildren. First Church’s commitment to continuing Virtual Worship on Sunday mornings allows the Benders and Jacobs (both couples spend winter in Florida), and Wiebenga way out in Portage Park, to continue making connections with this faith community.

**Pivoting During the Pandemic**

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The Youth ministry’s main challenge last spring was deciding how to approach Confirmation. “We had a wonderful group of students who had bonded by shared experiences in person on Sunday mornings,” says Pastor Jane Cheema. Confirmation teacher Jim Hagedorn quickly shifted classes to Zoom—“His passion for teaching youth about this church is a huge gift to our community,” Cheema says—but the students were adamant that they wanted to be confirmed together and in person. That meant waiting until July, when outdoor gatherings were permitted. “Pastor Grace, Jim and I decided the church courtyard would be more intimate than a park,” Cheema says. “Once we had the location, we wanted to make it super-special.” Each student and their family gathered at separate tables for a renewal of baptismal vows, communion, and a butterfly release, followed by a drive-by car parade down Hinman Avenue. “It was really an amazing, spirit-filled experience,” Cheema says. “Lots of signs of celebration and joyful noises!”

For the church’s many mission-related activities, the key has been flexibility. “We’ve been able to keep our core programs going,” says Stephanie Clemson, chair of the Mission and Outreach Committee. “Because everyone is navigating the pandemic in their own way, we’ve focused on offering a range of options, so people



*With a great deal of careful planning and creative problem solving Confirmation Sunday in July 2020 became a beautifully meaningful celebration — and another successful “pandemic pivot.” Photo by Frank Montagna.*

can be in service but still feel comfortable.”

Families now prepare meals at home for the Sack Lunch ministry, and the team that hosts the Thursday night Soup Kitchen—led by Tina Kalil—shifted their work to the Congregational Church House, a few blocks away. Bundled Blessings has continued to provide diapers throughout the pandemic and hosted a successful "Pack the Truck" event this fall. “It was a great opportunity for people to drive by church, drop off diapers, and see a few familiar faces while still staying safe,” says Clemson. (That one event collected more than 26,000 diapers.) First Church will also be hosting the Interfaith Action Emergency Overnight Shelter again this year, though only for the two weeks Total Child is on break, since it

will be held in the Great Hall. “We’re glad we can still use our building to serve, even if we can’t provide the hospitality we’ve provided in the past,” says Clemson.

When church shut down in March, Music Minister Brian Schoettler faced both professional and personal struggles: he had to figure out how to integrate music into a virtual service, while recovering from two unexpected surgeries that left him with a lingering numbness in two of his fingers. “In some sense, recording hymns and finding repertoire I could play was part of my physical therapy,” he says.

As choir practices shifted to Zoom, Schoettler became as much a technician as a musician, spending

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hours recording and editing videos to be used during virtual worship. (A part-time AV tech has since been hired to handle those tasks.) During the summer, he made sure instrumental music was part of the outdoor services at ETHS and Lunt Park.

Fellowship groups that used to center around in-person meetings have also found ways to adapt. The Limitless group, described as “for all ages and stages” by co-leader Stephanie Peters, used to offer a wide range of outings, from trivia nights to food festivals to Christmas caroling. Then came the mid-March shutdown. “We struggled to figure out how to keep the group going,” admits Peters. “Then Nancy Pendergrass suggested we start playing Trivia Pursuit via Zoom.” It worked out so well that Limitless now meets online

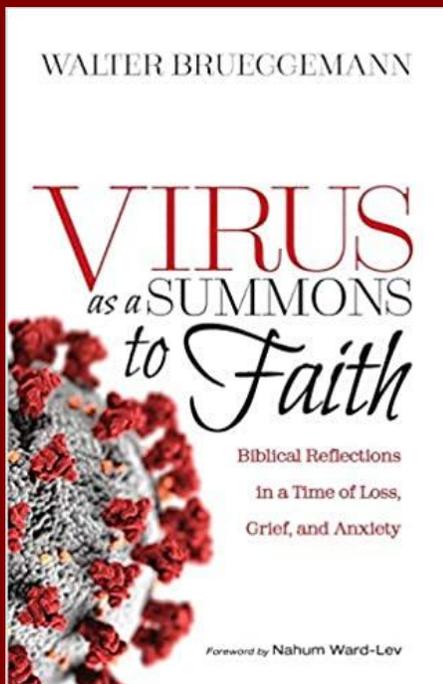
every Thursday night for board games, with anywhere from six to thirteen people attending. (New members are always welcome—email Stephanie at [stephdeloney@gmail.com](mailto:stephdeloney@gmail.com) for info.)

During Advent the First Church community continues to find new ways of celebrating the holiday season, while looking forward to the time such changes are no longer necessary. “The Music Ministry has adapted to our new normal, but we still long for the day when we can resume in-person singing,” says Schoettler. “I’m not just talking about the Chancel Choir, but the congregational song that’s at the core of our worship—a ritual we take part in together in remembrance, in praise, and in hope.”



Rebecca Gould Photography

**Elizabeth Blackwell** is a journalist, novelist, parent of three teenagers, and a First Church member since 2006.



## ONE CHURCH ONE BOOK CONSIDERS THE COVID EXPERIENCE

As this issue is finalized, four small groups and 30 people are reading and reflecting on Walter Brueggemann’s new book *Virus as a Summons to Faith* as part of our One Church One Book program this Advent.

Director of Christian Education Mitchell Jackson, who coordinates the One Church One Book program, points to the timeliness of the book, of course, and how Brueggemann helps readers think of the pandemic in biblical terms. While American mythology focuses on the viewpoints of “winners, titans, moguls, and legends,” explains Jackson, the Bible “offers a perspective on loss, devastation, and grief.”

One Church One Book, says Jackson, “is always about getting the church together. It’s about meeting new people, strengthening friendships, and sharing ideas.” Jackson anticipate the next One Church One Book opportunity will be in Lent 2021.

# Alternative Christmas Giving: Gifts that Do Good

Each year First Church offers the opportunity to make a charitable donation in honor of a friend or loved one through our Alternative Christmas Giving program. Your “gifts” take a step toward alleviating poverty, human suffering, and inequity. This year, the Mission and Outreach Committee has chosen to focus on four local organizations.

**Young, Black & Lit** (*perfect for your favorite bookworm*) This non-profit's mission is to "increase access to children's books that center, reflect, and affirm the experiences of Black children." Books are distributed through schools and day care sites.

**The Laundry Cafe** (*perfect for your roommate*) Project co-creators are working to encourage Black business development and build community spirit in Evanston's Fifth Ward through a laundromat with Wi-Fi and computer access that is also a gathering place.

**PTA Equity Project** (*perfect for a special teacher or student*) This group works to equitably distribute PTA funds across District 65 the district so that all students can access important enrichment and community-building opportunities.

**Curt's Cafe** (*perfect for your coffee or cooking buddy*) Curt's offers at-risk and formerly incarcerated young people job training and skills to work in the food service industry along with coaching, help with GED completion, and job counseling.

Anyone who makes a donation to one of these four projects will receive a card to let someone special know that a gift has been made in their honor. Donations can be made online at <https://faithatfirst.webconnex.com/AltCmasGiving2020>. Questions can be directed to Stephanie Clemson at [sclimson@gmail.com](mailto:sclimson@gmail.com).



Photo by Frank Montagna

Thanks to the Mission and Outreach team for coordinating this missional giving opportunity. The gift of hope is a powerful way to celebrate the season.



## STAR TREE AGAIN REACHES GOAL

The holidays will be brighter for over 100 children, youth, and families in the local community. Thanks to the generosity of this congregation and the longtime partnership between First Church and Youth & Opportunity United (Y.O.U.) these families will celebrate the season with holiday gifts and grocery gift cards funded by your Star Tree donations.

2020 marks the 23rd year of this partnership, and it was no small feat to continue the Star Tree tradition in a safe way during a particularly concerning time in the pandemic. But Bev Otey was determined to make it work. “This year there wasn't the excitement of selecting a star by our beautiful Star Tree, but knowing that we are continuing to support many families with holiday gifts makes my heart happy, and I am thankful for that,” reports Otey. This year I look for blessings wherever they may be.”

## Meet Our Newest Members

We are delighted to welcome these new members to the congregation, and eager to see how their unique talents and passions help shape the faith community First Church is becoming! For more on our first virtual new member class, see the article on page 5.

Please greet these persons when you have the opportunity to do so. Their contact info will be available on Realm according to the privacy settings they choose.



*Amanda Cacich*



*Katy Clusen*



*Robert Harris*



*Jake and Savannah Hemminger*



*Sally and Tom Jacob*



*Dianne and Todd Kibbey*



*Marlyse Wiebenga*

*Not pictured: Don and Vanessa Bender*

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**NEWS AND NOTES FROM FIRST CHURCH**

**SAVE THE DATE FOR CHURCH CONFERENCE**

Mark your calendars for our annual church conference with District Superintendent Rev. Brittany Isaac on Sunday, Jan.10 at 11:30 a.m. via Zoom. This meeting includes approval of the 2021 operating budget and reports on church membership and key ministry areas. All church members are asked to attend and vote.

**YOUTH MINISTRY LOOKS AHEAD**

Households with youth are encouraged to save the dates for these youth ministry events. Plans will adjust as needed to assure the health and safety of all participants.

*Feb. 5 - 7: Youth Winter Retreat*

Online and hopefully with in- person/ outdoor options! Cost is \$50/youth.

*June 25-27: Middle School Mission Trip.* In and around Evanston and Chicago. No overnights.

*July 25-31: High School Mission Trip with the Appalachia Service Project*

Plans, protocols, and registration for mission trips and the retreat will be shared in early January.



*Pageant photo by Frank Montagna*

**GET ORGANIZED FOR 2021**

As you make plans for the new year, make sure your church events are included on the church calendar. Please check [www.faithatfirst.com/events](http://www.faithatfirst.com/events) . If your gathering is missing, complete the calendar and publicity

request form online at [www.faithatfirst.com/registrations/](http://www.faithatfirst.com/registrations/) .

**GET IN THE E-LOOP**

If you aren't getting the weekly e-news, send an email to [mary@faithatfirst.com](mailto:mary@faithatfirst.com). We'd love to add you!