

The Zoom story at the Church of the Good Shepherd UCC, Carbondale IL, 2020-2021

By Dale O. Ritzel, Treasurer, Church of the Good Shepherd

13 March 2020

In the early part of March 2020, the COGS Pastor and her family were on holiday visiting family in Florida while my wife and I were visiting our daughter, her husband, and our granddaughter in Bloomington MN. During this time there was a lot of breaking news about a newly identified virus, SARS-CoV-2, where the potential of ongoing health issues was being talked about throughout the world. On 11 March 2020, all travel from Europe was stopped and then on 13 March 2020 the US announced the beginning of a lockdown of movement around the USA which was also the day which my wife and I were told by our daughter to drive back to Carbondale IL. Our Pastor and her family were doing the same thing cutting their holiday trip by some days. Because of need to protect our church family and having to decide what our next steps would be, the service on 15 March 2020 was cancelled (a supplied pastor was to do the service). Our Pastor and I began discussing what our next steps for providing church services to our members over the next few weeks would be during the “temporary” shut down and following public health guideline/recommendations.

22 March 2020

Our Pastor gave me the task to find a way to offer church services in a virtual format. Since I have some experience (as a participant) with Zoom, I started to research what Zoom and other such formats could do for COGS. I talked with a few people who I knew that had worked with Zoom and got their advice. I also explored many other virtual event formats including Cisco Webex, Microsoft Team, Google Hangouts, Google Meet, WhatsApp, GoToMeeting, and FaceTime meetings. On 16 March 2020, I purchased Zoom Pro for the church (I am the church’s Treasurer). I picked the Pro version of Zoom, because the regular free version of Zoom had a limit of 40 minutes of use at any one time. Zoom Pro sessions can run up to 24 hours (why would anyone have such a long virtual session) and have up to 100 people participating. Since we wanted to see everyone on the screen we did not go with the Webinar version of Zoom, where you are only limited to seeing the speakers (and Webinar costs more too). We had our first Zoom virtual service on 22 March 2020.

The first few weeks were interesting (and a tremendous learning experience) for me. Having to learn the basic and more advanced settings of Zoom to let people in, to control the audio, to setup waiting rooms, etc. took some time. Even though we used our membership and friends email addresses to send out Zoom links to our church service, we were consider about people coming into our virtual church service who we had not invited. So each week for the first 2 months we changed the ID and Password for our church service link to reduce the likelihood of an unwelcomed persons coming into our service.

We had to decide whether we were going to record the church services and make them available on YouTube or some other Web site. Zoom Pro allows you to record both video and audio via the cloud, but I found out quickly that the amount of space you had on the cloud was limited to

about 3-4 church services unless you wanted to pay for more cloud space. We decided to purchase a video/audio editing software program which would allow us to save each recording on a local computer and then edit the recording later to make it available to members and friends of the church. As of the end of April 2021, we have recorded all 58 (at a cost of \$2.58/church service) church services on Zoom.

The music director, pianist, and choir has been able to function during the virtual church services. Early on our Pastor and Music Director found a free singing/music software package (Audacity) where the piano music would be made available to the choir members who would listen as individuals to pre-recording music file via ear muffs or plugs and record and sing the words to the music they were listening. The recording for each choir member would be emailed to the music director who would then layer each individual's singing onto the played piano music. The music director would use Microsoft Video Editor to add pictures supplied by church members and friends along with the words of the hymns that were would be singing during the service.

April 2020 on.

Starting that later part of March 2020, COGS started have financial committee meetings, Pastor's office time, member care meeting, church council meetings, virtual meditation, confirmation class meetings, choir meetings, etc. via Zoom. On 4 April 2020 until one month ago, many Women of COGS started to have Saturday Brunch Zoom session. Members started book review Zoom meetings. There were video viewing and discussion events via Zoom. A member had an art journaling event on Zoom on Sunday afternoon in May 2020. Church members were able to listen to presentations on various environmental issues, global missions, etc. In November 2020, our Pastor recommitted herself as a settled pastor at COGS via Zoom with our ISC Conference Minister Shana Johnson. In July 2020 we had a special church service on the blessing of the animals which was well attended by humans and their pets. We had an outside confirmation class graduation via Zoom. We also had one memorial service outside via Zoom. During the 14 months of the Pandemic we had 220 addition church related events that have been conducted via Zoom (an average of 16 events each month). When one considered all of the events (278) that we had during the 14 months, Zoom has costed COGs \$.54/event.

Kim Magwire, the Pastor of COGS, has a nice atrium in the center of her house which she used to conduct the church service for most of past year. It is a beautiful location with plants and nice natural lighting. Until recently, our Pastor conducted the church services from her home.

Members of the church would do the Gospel and New Testament reading from their own setting. Everyone was muted until they had to do a reading. The virtual service was open for conversation before the start of the service (and then everyone was muted) and also after the service (which would last sometimes up to an hour). The music director, the Pastor, and the person (me) running the virtual Zoom event were either host or co-host in order to share screens, and let people into the service.

During the past year, we had guest Pastors and missionaries to provide the message during church services when our minister was away. This added a nice feature of being able to have from other parts of Illinois and other states involved.

Final points of how Zoom church services benefitted the COGS:

1. Except for one Sunday, we had the church service starting time as a constant, 11 pm. The one except was on Sunday, 19 July 2020, when the church service was held at 7 pm. A good number of members and friends forgot about the change of time on that date.
2. We were able to have church services during the Pandemic without having to jeopardize the health and safety of our church members and friends.
3. We have had members and friends attend church services via Zoom from Texas, Florida, New Zealand, Missouri, Tennessee, Indiana, and others.
4. The members and friends of COGS enjoyed seeing/interacting with others at a time, where going out into groups of people was not logical.
5. Our weekly attendance in church service (via Zoom and the newer Hybrid model (live outside at church and Zoom) has increased over 80% from the time before the Pandemic.
6. Our weekly/monthly offerings has increased by 50% during the 14 months since the Pandemic started.
7. Our utility bills (water/sewer/trash/recycling/electric/gas has gone down.
8. We have been able to continue to pay our custodian, music director, pianist, and support staff.