

COVID-19 Stories From Around the Diocese of Louisiana

Focusing on Connection and Community

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I recently heard a colleague push back against what must already be the most tired marketing trope of the decade, "In these uncertain times..." "What times are certain?" he said. I agree. Life has always been full of uncertainty and change. There's a season for everything, as Ecclesiastes reminds us. But in every season, there is also a constant-God. Scripture describes a world born out of chaos into the hands of a loving and stable Creator and redeemed by the incarnational Christ Jesus. This idea has guided me and the leadership at both parishes where I serve as priest, Free Church of the Annunciation - Episcopal and Mount Olivet Episcopal Church, to shift the focus from chaos and uncertainty to connection and community with God and one another - to be present in this moment.

Early in the pandemic, I read a theological reflection from a Jesuit priest inviting us to see ourselves as a people in exile, as during the Prophets, when ancient Israel was removed from the temple, the physical presence of God in their lives. The great stability in their lives. As we have been separated from the eucharist, the physical, stable presence of God in our own lives. While the Israelites mourned their loss, the Prophets invited them to consider how to be the people of God without the temple. I felt this was a time for us to do the same. Our Episcopal and Anglican traditions offer many ways in which to experience the physical and stable presence of God when we gather, even without eucharist.

We read in Ezekiel that the prophet literally ate the Scripture rolls, feasting on the word of God as an example to the people in exile. We decided we would also feast on Scripture during this time. I moved our services online to Morning Prayer. We could not pretend that nothing had changed. It was a different time. We could do nothing about what was happening, but we could do something about our response. We needed to find new ways to commune together with God.

I decided to stream services from my house. My parishioners were working from home, so I would do the same. We're all in this together. I also felt it was good to set an example to stay home. It's been an opportunity to show people that we can find God in places other than the church building. God is wherever and however we gather. While acknowledging our loss, I encouraged us to embrace new-found opportunities before us.

It's been a time of creativity for me. I took the approach that online is a different medium than in-person so it should look different. Our streaming devices (phones, tablets, TVs) call for a more intimate experience. We do a live-stream at 10 a.m. each Sunday to foster community and connection in a way I felt pre-recording could not. We sometimes have technical issues, but in-person worship isn't perfect either. Mics go out. Readers sometimes cannot be heard. The wrong hymn might be played. Once we got over the need for perfection, we instead focused on having a shared experience. A friend of mine summed it up well when he observed that we are about "connection, not perfection." We follow the service with coffee hour on Zoom. We usually see about 20-25 people join in for time of fellowship, from all over the country and even from Canada. We end with prayer requests.



Rev. Duane Wiggin-Nettles
The Sermon



Mothering God
Voices Found #71 | Tune: Lady Chapel Singers

Jessica Holl
Soloist

Screenshots of a virtual worship service of Church of the Annunciation and Mount Olivet, New Orleans.

Mission and Ministry in the Time of COVID-19

Instead of retracting, we've expanded our small group offerings using Zoom. We have formed new parent groups and retiree groups that people have been talking about for years but could never seem to get off the ground before. We are meeting people where they are, as Jesus and the early church went to the people wherever they were.

I make a point to attend most small group meetings over Zoom in order to see and connect with folks since the opportunity for casual conversations before and after service is not possible. I also spend a great deal of time on the telephone to stay in touch or provide pastoral care. The length of phone calls has surprised me the most. They last much longer than a pre-pandemic call. While I had to adjust my schedule to this, I've welcomed it. The one-on-one conversations offer an opportunity of deep connection.

For all the disruption at this time, my parishes and I have learned new ways of being that we will carry into the next phase of our life together. Tomorrow won't look like the past or the present. The future will bring its own challenges and joys. Chaos will certainly be there. As in every age, we will be faced with the choice between shrinking from it in fear or stepping out into the light of Christ in the hands of a stable Creator.

The New Normal at St. George's Dragon Café

*Chip Duncan
Parishioner, St. George's, New Orleans*

We thought we were somehow immune to the problem in a country far away. We were getting ready for a St. Patrick's Day filled with hugging friends and strangers and sharing drinks outside of Tracey's. We had just bounced back from our successful Mardi Gras Spirits fundraiser complete with parades and celebrations before the soberness of Lent. Coming off of Mardi Gras no one seemed to even be talking about the virus. Life seemed normal.

Then the St. Patrick's Day Parade was canceled. Louisiana Lt. Governor Billy Nungesser agreed that precautions should be taken to stop the spread of the COVID-19 novel coronavirus, but he thought the City of New Orleans went too far by canceling the parades. Then things got weird.

On Sunday, March 15th, it was Team One's day to



[Photograph by Chip Duncan] Preparing meals to go at the Dragon Café Feeding Ministry.

prepare and serve breakfast at Dragon Café. We were all hearing about COVID-19 and coronavirus. At that time, the state only had three presumptive COVID-19 cases reported. Dusty Porter, Ph.D. Vice President for Student Affairs at Tulane had been briefed all week regarding the coronavirus and knew what precautions had to be taken. Under Dusty's guidance, we quickly rearranged our tables and reconfigured the first floor of the church to accommodate more tables so we could space our guests six feet apart.

We served the breakfast in our leftover Styrofoam "take away" boxes in order to avoid handling the plates and flatware. Dragon Café had gone "green" a year ago under the direction of Deacon Joey Clavijo and George Bond and their sustainability program. We purchased dishes, glasses, and supplies from a local restaurant that was closing and stopped our order of paper plates and Styrofoam coffee cups. Due to safety and health concerns, we had to put health over the environment for the time being. This development prompted a trip to Restaurant Depot to stock up on "carry out" supplies. Three hours were spent in line to buy take out boxes, gloves, and other supplies. Everyone there was looking for the same things to service a new "takeout" world.

After much discussion and a flurry of e-mails regarding safety and concerns, the decision was made to carry on with our standard breakfast every Sunday morning as we have done since Katrina. On average, we serve about 75 to 100 meals between 8:30 and 9:30 am every Sunday morning. Dragon Café has not missed serving a meal since its inception after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Our