



# SILVER LININGS

Technology, personal support came to the fore for Naples churches during the pandemic. As church services return, some lessons learned will stay.

Harriet Howard Heithaus Naples Daily News | USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

Pastor Nancy Mayeux noticed a startling development when First United Methodist Church of Naples began streaming its services during the pandemic. • The congregation was getting members who didn't live in Naples. They had never been to Naples. Furthermore, they didn't necessarily plan on coming here. • But they had found a spiritual home in the church, and were tuning in every week to watch its services.

"That was actually a nice thing that came out of the pandemic," said Mayeux, who found several silver linings to the pandemic.

"Our seasonal people used to leave for the summer and we didn't hear from them until they came back again in October. Now they're worshipping online. With Zoom they're participating in business meetings," she said.

"In the past they would have been gone for five or six months.

Now they continue to be involved with the life of the church."

## We're now cyber-savvy

Mayeux was one of a number of Collier County clergy who agreed that Covid-19 had changed their ministries to align with the age of computers.

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## Remembering another pandemic

Nancy Mayeux, pastor of First United Methodist Church of Naples, has a special consciousness in her call to help during the events of last year.

"My grandmother was a young nurse during the 1918 pandemic and told us terrible stories of what she went through," she wrote in a note after her interview with the Daily News.

"They put her in a big ward in NYC with hundreds of beds. She said there was nothing she and the other nurses could do for them other than to give them a can to spit into and try to comfort them.

"She said no one left."



**TOP: St. John the Evangelist congregation members offer the Sign of Peace during Mass June 26 in Naples.**

PHOTOS BY JON AUSTRIA/  
NAPLES DAILY NEWS

**LEFT: Members worship at The Independent Haitian Church of God in East Naples on Tuesday.**



## Churches

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time," said Bishop Frank J. Dewayne, bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Venice. When part of your parish is tuned in, the 45-minute to one-hour time limit considered optimal for screen engagement is much more important. And when your volunteer says he or she can only handle your taping for an hour, it's critical.

"It's like 'You've gotta get this done, Father.' So maybe there's a little more streamlining."

Technology has its own faults: Mayeux recalled one Sunday when the camera stopped functioning and missed half the service. She gamely returned and recorded the sermon, closing prayer and benediction for its viewers.

For Eric Devaristes, pastor of the Independent Haitian Church of God in Naples, bringing online services to church brought a new sense of involvement to its teens.

"Myself, I'm not too good at this," he conceded. "We got help from the kids."

All of them see cyber-church overtones in their denominations' future. Even giving changed: The Diocese of Venice helped a few parishes without online giving set up a site. Devaristes's church joined PayPal. He also began recording phone messages to reach.

Marco Island Jewish Congregation even sent its members their own online prayer book.

"After our leadership resolved on Wednesday, March 18th (2020), to suspend live worship, we created a 'Readers Digest Prayerbook' for worshippers to use from home; uploaded it to the congregational website; notified membership of the change-over, with instructions for how to install and log on to Zoom; and were up and running with on-line worship two days later on Friday the 20th," said Rabbi Mark Gross, responding by email.

It helped, he cautioned, that most of his congregation are technologically savvy.

### Covid-19 upped emotional support needs

Another major lesson: Churches already offer emotional ballast to their members. They can create even more.

The Diocese of Venice offered a service called Telemental Health Counseling through Catholic Charities, and found teens in particular were suffering without the social outlets of school and activities.

"A segment of that focused on young people because they have different emotional needs and they were hurting during the pandemic," Dewayne said. Priests, as well, dealt with a heavy emotional burden through the pandemic, in some cases being the person to deliver farewell words from loved ones to a dying family member in isolation, he added.

Mayeux and her congregation paired needs. The Methodist church had given as mandate help for hunger during the pandemic. And her congregation missed each other. So the church began soliciting donations of foods for Grace Place and St. Matthew's House, and organized small groups of masked, gloved volunteers to begin packing foods for Meals of Hope weekly. Even its boy scout troop takes a turn.

"It was the first social thing everybody could do in December inside," she said.

"Teachers, boy scouts with whole troop parents and all came and packed. It's a great way way to be in mission to the community and live out how Jesus has asked us to be in serving others."



Pastor Nancy Mayeux, left, helps pack grocery bags with dry goods during the Meal Packing Ministry event for Meals of Hope Wednesday at First United Methodist Church in Naples. The church has teamed up with Meals of Hope to help pack and distribute over 5,000 meals to hungry families in the community as part of the Fill The Table initiative.

PHOTOS BY JON AUSTRIA/NAPLES DAILY NEWS | USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA



Pastor Eric Devaristes, left, prays with his congregation at The Independent Haitian Church of God in East Naples on Tuesday.



Deacon Hal Brenner, left, and the Rev. Tomasz Zalewski perform the communion rites June 26 at St. John the Evangelist in Naples.

Although the church has returned to in-person services, it continues the meal packing. It has also begun taking its altar arrangement to various hospital floors and the front desks of nonprofit community organizations: "People are just floored when we walk in with the

flowers."

### We need to be with each other

Gross said some of his congregation members found cyber-connectivity unsatisfactory.

"Ironically enough, after we installed a live-streaming system last summer so we could offer the reassuring optics of the Cantor and I leading worship together from our synagogue, several members grew weary of the passivity of that experience because they missed even the limited interaction in the 'gallery,'" Gross observed. It began in-person services again in May.

All the churches contacted have in-person services now, but with built-in accommodations.

"I am vaccinated. And I would say to everyone I want you to be vaccinated, too. But I can't ask them whether they are. I can't make them get a vaccination," he said.

So the Independent Haitian Church still has a distancing policy and a mask requirement to keep its members safe. It reallocated its Sunday school to larger rooms and added a second service to allow everyone in the 300-member congregation to attend.

The First United Methodist has among other accommodations, a section called "comfort zone," where masks are required.

Under its denomination's restrictions, outside groups are still not allowed to meet inside the church buildings. So to accommodate an Alcoholics Anonymous group, the church put picnic tables outdoors for its members.

Catholic churches are open now, so the faithful are expected to attend. But Bishop Dewayne said it encourages those who are not vaccinated to wear masks. The church, he said, also respects the needs of those who still feel unsafe or who have conditions that didn't allow them to be vaccinated. The online services will always be available for them, he said.

All the pastors contacted had financial challenges thrown at them. But all of them also said extra support has come from those who had resources. Dewayne, also like the others, said he is constantly impressed with the generosity of the faithful in Southwest Florida.

"How could they donate? People wanted to know," he said. "I will say it over and over again. People were incredibly generous during the pandemic."

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