



the MESSENGERbell

May 2021

CHURCH PROGRAMMING PLANS

As the public health situation in our community continues to improve, so much will be possible again that has not been possible in the past year. As has been reported to Church Council, a variety of church programs are being planned again. These have been planned by a variety of church groups and although this is not an exhaustive list, I hope it will help you to understand what is happening right now in the church.

Worship—We have held one outdoor, in-person service, and it was a rousing success. Our next outdoor, in-person service will be held on May 9th, at 9 a.m. on the church lawn. These are somewhat at the whim of the weather, but the plan is to hold these services regularly.

Youth programming—FUJI and FUSH have been able to hold in-person programming again. There was strong participation and the event was very encouraging for being able to continue such programming outdoors.

Gathering opportunities—There are several opportunities for members of the church to gather in small groups indoors at the church. The first has been our sanctuary prayer time, planned by the Worship Music and the Arts team. There will also be an opportunity to attend a demonstration of our newly refurbished organ. Our own Michael Surratt will show off all the bells and whistles of what our amazing Casavant organ can do. Watch the eblasts for more information about this upcoming event. If you have an idea for a gathering of 20 or fewer people, please reach out to one of the clergy for help planning that.

Before I close, allow me to say that I know not everyone will be ready to participate in activities such as these. That is absolutely okay. We have lived through a tremendously difficult time. There is no one “right way” to order our lives as we emerge from beneath the specter of pandemic. Our reality as a church for the foreseeable future is that we are going to be all over the map. Some are fully vaccinated, others are not. Some are eager to gather, some are not ready. Some are wondering why we aren’t moving faster, others are wondering why we aren’t being more cautious. Again, that is absolutely okay. In this season, too, we will find a way to be the church for one another.

Rev. John Edgerton, Lead Pastor



moving from

WORDS TO WITNESS IN OUR
RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.

moving from

INDIVIDUALISM TO INTIMATE
FELLOWSHIP IN OUR RELATIONSHIP
WITH OTHER MEMBERS OF THE
CHURCH COMMUNITY.

moving from

CHARITY TO CHANGING
STRUCTURES IN OUR RELATIONSHIP
WITH THE WORLD.

A few highlights from this month's Messenger Bell: outdoor worship returns this month, page 2; refreshing our purpose and covenant, page 3; an introduction to new members, page 5; adult education opportunities, page 7; and an update on the Quest confirmation program for 2021-22, page 8.



FIRST
UNITED
CHURCH OF
OAK PARK

Holy Week in Review

Holy Week 2021 offered new opportunities! Thank you to our vaccinated crew of bakers who came to the church (and those who baked at home), making a drive-through Maundy Thursday communion bread pick-up possible. We are so grateful. Thank you to all who made our first in-person worship service at Easter Sunrise a holy time full of joy and wonder.



Above: Our Maundy Thursday bread bakers and drive-through bread distribution.

Right: Happy faces (behind those masks!) at Easter Sunday Sunrise worship.



Outdoor Worship—May 9

On May 9 at 9 a.m., weather permitting, we will gather for worship on the lawn for a socially distanced, outdoor service with prayer, word, message, and song.

In order to stay within capacity limits, we ask that you reserve "tickets" through Eventbrite by [clicking here](#). Please reserve a ticket for each person in your group. More information on health and safety protocols is also available on the Eventbrite site.



Worshipping Virtually Sundays at 11 a.m.

[CLICK TO JOIN ON YOUTUBE](#)

May 9	Lydia Mulkey
Mother's Day	
9 a.m. Outdoor Worship	
11 a.m. Virtual Worship	
May 16	John Edgerton
May 23	John Edgerton
Pentecost	
Fourth Sunday Offering	
Last Sunday of the Program Year	
May 30	Lydia Mulkey
Memorial Day Weekend	

From the Council Moderator

Greetings from your Church Council! Here are highlights of our April meeting:

Devotion: Jamie Shamhart shared a devotion on the theme of “hope” that she explained was inspired by the reflections offered by our Church’s youth during the recent Youth Sunday service. She concluded with a video accompanying a poem by Helen Steiner Rice:

THE BEND IN THE ROAD

Sometimes we come to life's crossroads
And we view what we think is the end.
But God has a much wider vision
And he knows that it's only a bend-

The road will go on and get smoother
And after we've stopped for a rest,
The path that lies hidden beyond us
Is often the path that is best.

So rest and relax and grow stronger,
Let go and let God share your load
And have faith in a brighter tomorrow-
You've just come to a bend in the road.

Statement of Purpose and Congregational Covenant: The Council endorsed a task force’s recommendation of a refreshed statement of the Church’s purpose, for consideration by the congregation as an amendment to Article II of the Constitution. The Council also approved refreshed covenant language in Article IV, suggested last year by the Deacons. A congregational meeting for voting on these amendments will be scheduled for July. For more details about the proposed revisions, please see the announcement from John Edgerton and Sallie Smylie in this Messenger Bell.

Unemployment Compensation: The Council approved a recommendation from the Finance and Personnel Teams to set up a plan for the Church to self-insure for payments that would be available to affected employees were the Church to need to engage in a lay-off. Under the plan, an affected employee would receive payments equivalent to what the employee would receive through the State of Illinois unemployment compensation system (in which the Church does not and is not required to participate). The Church has no current plan, need, or desire to use this fund but wishes to provide some measure of reassurance and protection for our employees. Thanks to Finance Team members Susan Macaulay, Bruce Matson, Finance Administrator Shirley Kyle, and Financial Consultant Maureen Wheeler for their work researching various options and formulating this plan for the Church.

Installation of New Tree in Memorial Garden and Rain Garden: The Council thanks Sarah Thompson (Chair of the Garden sub-team of Building & Grounds) who, with the support of the Environmental Justice sub-team of Faith in Action, spearheaded a project for installation of a rain garden with native shrubs and flowers in the southeast area of the lawn adjacent to the labyrinth. Rainwater from the sanctuary roof will be delivered to the rain garden basin (and diverted from a downspout) by piping under the far south end of the Memorial Garden. Care will be taken not to disrupt the sacred ground of the Memorial Garden. Council approved this plan along with the planting of a magnolia tree in the Memorial Garden to replace the tree that recently was removed.

Pledge Registrar: The Council extends its gratitude to Kelly Pollock who has agreed to serve as the Church’s Pledge Registrar. This is a role Council created to serve as the point person for the congregation, the Stewardship and Finance Teams, and the finance staff for tracking and following up on pledged and non-pledged gifts to the Church, answering questions from congregants and assisting them as needed with online gifts. Kelly will be gearing up over the next several months to serve in this role.

Nominating Team: Many thanks to the Nominating Team, chaired by Art Spooner, for its hard work compiling full slates for the congregation to elect members of the Council, the Board of Deacons, and the Nominating Team at the May 2 election meeting. And to Art – THANK YOU for your dedicated leadership and service on Nominating!

Sallie Smylie, Moderator

Refreshing Our Purpose and Covenant

We are living through a truly transformative time in the life of the church. We have reinvented every aspect of what we do as a church, operating within tight constraints. And now, as we look ahead, we see many more open horizons. So much will be possible for us in the year to come, with rising vaccinations and falling case numbers. We have the opportunity coming out of COVID to look afresh at the key questions of who we are as a congregation, what our purposes are, and where God is calling us to go.

There is a statement that is well known and has for several years expressed our sense of where God is calling us to go (we are moving from words to witness, from individualism to intimate fellowship, from charity to changing structures). This language is important and we hope to continue to embrace and draw inspiration from these aspirations for years

to come.

But there is not a clear and well embraced answer to the question: who are we as a church? What is our identity? What is our very purpose? Although there are multiple statements relating to the church's purposes or identity, we do not have a statement that our congregation uniformly understands and embraces that describes the heart and soul of this place. As we look to open horizons and explore new opportunities, we must know who we are to make decisions about our church's priorities, ministries, and vision for the future. Indeed, it is the predicate for all that we do.

The Church Council tasked a group to review existing formulations of our church's purposes and to recommend a statement the congregation can embrace. This group (composed of Rick Ashton, Megan Lewis, Marteki Reed, Jamie Shamhart, Mark Smylie, and ex officio members John Edgerton and Sallie Smylie) has drafted such a statement, which the Council has endorsed. The statement is:

We are a Christian Community, members of the worldwide Body of Christ, called together for the work of disciples:

Worshipping God, as we proclaim our Christian reformed faith and celebrate the sacraments as its deepest expression.

Sharing the Good News of the Gospel, as we strive to build a just and peaceful world.

Nurturing the faith of children, youth, and adults, as we shape Christian character and conduct.

Caring for each other as a congregation, as we share our joys and sorrows.

Loving our neighbors near and far, as we actively use our hands, voices, and many other resources to serve those in need.

To fully embrace a statement that defines what makes us who we are, we will need robust and enthusiastic engagement from the congregation. We want to know if the statement resonates with you, if anything is missing without which we are describing some other church, if there is language you don't understand, much less embrace. Much more important than a vote to approve this language is a thorough embrace of this language by the congregation. And to that end we want to hear from you in small group and congregational discussions to be scheduled in the coming weeks.

Because of the depth of importance of these matters, these decisions will need to be made by vote of the congregation as a whole. If approved by the congregation, language about the purpose of the church would be included in our church's Constitution, replacing the current language of Arti-

cle II.

At the same time as the congregation is asked to consider amending Article II, we also will seek approval of refreshed language for Article IV. This article contains the congregational covenant – the promises we make to each other to be successful to accomplish our collective purpose. The refreshed covenant, suggested last year by the Deacons and endorsed by the Council, reads as follows:

“Members of the church covenant together to:

- Follow and model the ways of Jesus the Christ;
- Search for an honest understanding and expression of Christian faith through worship and education;
- Nurture and care for and support each other, celebrating joys, extending support in times of grief and struggle, and working in good faith to restore relationships in times of conflict;
- Engage and share in the life of the church, contributing our talents and resources to its mission and ministries and seeking connection through church events;
- Advocate for the poor, marginalized and oppressed, seeking peace and understanding in the world;
- Include people of all racial, ethnic, cultural identities, gender identities, sexual orientations, and abilities in all aspects of our congregational life.”

You will be learning more about the new proposed language through written communications and reflections during worship. And, as mentioned above, opportunities for discussion also are being planned. The pastoral staff and Council invite and look forward to your participation in the weeks ahead as we renew our purpose and covenant.

John Edgerton, Lead Pastor
Sallie Smylie, Moderator of Council

May Peace Corner

“Along with faith and prayer, I also know that ‘faith without work is dead.’ I am imploring everyone to continue to fight for more comprehensive background checks — especially as we see gun sales surge.”

--Rev. Sharon Risher

[Rev. Risher](#) lost her mother, two cousins and her childhood friend at the Mother Emanuel African Methodist Church shooting in Charleston, SC in 2015



Welcome to Our Newest Members

Beth and Paul Dickerson

Beth and Paul joined First United in November 2020. They moved to Oak Park about four years ago and had been worshipping with us for over a year before joining. They have three grown children and four grandchildren. They have a vacation home near Sturgis, Michigan, and are looking forward to spending most of the summer there.



Beth has been collaborating with First United ministers since November in the capacity of "Community Minister" (a voluntary position) to provide emotional and spiritual support to our congregation. She also led a Bible Study entitled "Naughty Women of the Old Testament" in October 2020 and will hopefully be providing more such discussions. You can read more about Beth in the January 2021 Messenger Bell.

Paul is a retired electrical engineer. He is currently the president of their condo association. He has been serving the wider UCC as a member of the Church and Ministry Team of the Chicago Metropolitan Association. Recently, he joined the Technology Team at First United. Paul also is interested in environmental and social justice issues and has participated in several lobbying days in Springfield.

Cathy and Phyllis Dunn

Cathy Dunn and her mother Phyllis Dunn moved to Oak Park from the Avondale neighborhood in April 2020 and were introduced to the church by Bob Downs. They both enjoy the online services and find great comfort in them. They are especially taken by the warmth and inclusiveness of First United, and the beautiful music. Cathy sings at Lyric Opera, plays organ for the 1st Church of Christian Scientist in Elmhurst, and is Resident Stage Director for Petite Opera. During the pandemic, while unable to perform, she has started an estate sale business. Phyllis enjoys music, art, taking



walks, and like Cathy, she dearly loves animals. They can't wait to attend church in person and meet everyone!

Betsy Edgerton

Betsy is a journalism professor at Columbia College in Chicago and lives in Oak Park with her husband and two children. She joined First United Church in February 2020 and is now a member



of the Communications Team. Since the pandemic began, her family has all been at home, working, teaching, and attending school. They have tried to make the most of it, especially last summer, when they spent weekends trying out the bike trails of the Chicago area. Favorite ride: the Fox River trail, which was done in several stages.

Brenda and Bruce Matson

Bruce and Brenda recently celebrated their 56th wedding anniversary, having lived in Oak Park for all 56 years. They were long time members of Fair Oaks Presbyterian Church where Bruce was financial secretary and Brenda was involved in the Logos program, Board of Deacons, mission committee, FND soup kitchen and Presbyterian Women. Brenda is currently on the Newcomers Team and worked tirelessly on the Alternative Christmas Store in 2019. They have two children and two grandsons, all in the Chicago area. Bruce is a graduate of Northwestern University and Brenda a graduate of Roosevelt and Concordia Universities. Before retirement both were involved in senior advocacy. They are eager to return to church life, as they joined just before the lockdown.



WELCOME!!

Humans of First United

Earlier this year, First United members paired up to take part in a connections project that we titled “Humans of First United.” The goal of the project was simply to get to know one another and make connections during a time when disconnection has seemed the norm. Some of our Humans of First United participants agreed to tell us a little more about one another. This month, Bobbie Kmiec introduces us to her partner Betty Gehring, while we also meet Debby Preiser who was paired with Pauline Coffman.

Meet Debby Preiser

Born and raised in St. Louis, Debby Preiser graduated from the University of Missouri School of Journalism in 1969 and came to Chicago to work as a catalog advertising copywriter for Sears Roebuck on the west side. She moved into marketing and communications for Sears, eventually working from a window office on the 40th floor of Sears Tower.



In 1983, she moved to Oak Park with her husband Marty and newborn son Joseph. After attending a Leaps and Bounds exercise class led by an Oak Park resident, she walked into the *Wednesday Journal* and offered to write a story and provide photos from the class. While the features editor Mary Haley suggested that story would be “old” news by the following week, she began offering feature story assignments to Debby, who became a freelance writer for the *Wednesday Journal*.

Joseph, now 37, met Lexi Myers when they were first-year students at Oak Park-River Forest High School. The two married in September 2019 and now have a 10-month-old daughter named Hailee. Debby may be the oldest first-time grandmother she knows!

Debby found her “perfect” job at the Oak Park Public Library, where she has been for more than 25 years. Originally hired as the first freelance communications person, Debby now plans adult programming, art exhibits, and receptions in the library's art gallery.

Over the years, Debby has written grants to bring National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) traveling exhibits and documentary film series to Oak Park as well as National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) community Big Read series on Hemingway, Poe, and Twain.

In January 2004, Debby helped to found the Oak Park Photography Club, which has continued to meet twice a month for nearly 17 years.

Meet Betty Gehring

Anyone who has had the good fortune to be in conversation with Betty Gehring has quickly discovered her wonderful sense of humor and how proud she is of her

family. Her face lights up when she talks of her three children and their spouses, her seven grandchildren and, of course, her three grand-pets. On any given Wednesday, you might find Betty at our Zoom Bible study class, puppy sitting little Stevie, the black schnoodle.



Betty and her late husband Phil retired from wonderful careers teaching music in Indiana to settle in Oak Park. Prior to their move, Betty had commuted each week from Valparaiso to Oak Park to babysit her grandchildren. In 2009 they finally decided it was time to make a permanent move to be near family. Through their grandchildren's involvement in youth group, Betty and Phil discovered First United Church and became faithful members.

Growing up in Iowa, she began violin study at the age of nine. She received the BM in violin performance from the Oberlin Conservatory, where she met Phil, and they began a marriage that lasted for 69 years. After graduate study at Syracuse University they both taught in North Carolina and then for 50 years at Valparaiso University (Phil as head of the organ department). During that time they played many recitals together in churches in this country and abroad. Today the memories of those experiences (some of which are funny) and recordings they made together are very precious to her. She finds comfort and spiritual connection in all music by Bach, Schubert and Franck. Betty is very happy to be at First United and we are glad she is here!

Labyrinth Talk and Walk— May 16 at 9 a.m.

Whether you turn to the right or the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you saying: "This is the way, walk it."—Isaiah 30:21

Join us on May 16 at 9 a.m. (weather permitting) and learn about how our labyrinth can be used as a tool for spiritual formation and prayer. Then take some time to enjoy walking it. Please wear a mask.



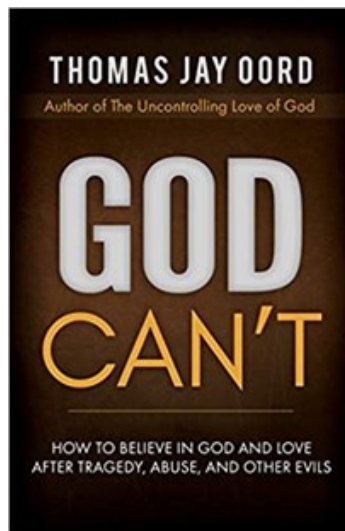
Adult Education—Book Group

Mondays, May 17 and 24 at
7:30 p.m. on Zoom

"God Can't: How to Believe in God and Love After Tragedy, Abuse, and Other Evils" by Thomas Jay Oord.

Join hosts Kathryn Heavey and Anne Koerber in two discussion sessions on this provocative book. After all the tragedy we have experienced in the last year, this book is particularly poignant. Why do bad things happen? What does God have to do with it?

To sign up, email lmulkey@firstunitedoakpark.com with the subject line "God Can't."



BUILD Gala—Honoring One of First United's Own

First United Mission Partner BUILD is holding their virtual gala on May 19 at 7 p.m. with a mix of live and prerecorded content. As part of this year's Gala, First United Member Pete Todd will be honored with a Volunteer Special Acknowledgment for the work he has done throughout his years with BUILD, launching a legacy of urban farming and green spaces that are a core piece of the BUILD identity.

[Click here](#) to register for the virtual gala and also to learn about some pre-gala activities including in-person options.



Dinner & a Movie—May 9

Join Ron Haas for dinner and a screening via Zoom of "Give Me Liberty." Our screening will begin at 6 p.m. Email Ron Haas (haas.inchicago@comcast.net) or call at (708) 415-0688 to be included in the Zoom invitation.

Medical transport driver Vic is late, but it's not his fault. Roads are closed for a protest, and no one else can shuttle his Russian grandfather and émigré friends to a funeral. The new route uproots his scheduled clients, particularly Tracy, a vibrant young woman with ALS. As the day goes from hectic to off-the-rails, their collective ride becomes a hilarious, compassionate, and intersectional portrait of American dreams.





We are still collecting recipes for our Chili Cook Off Cookbook to benefit our FUJI Youth Group and Beyond Hunger. Please complete this [Recipe Submission Form](#) to have your recipe included in the cookbook! And please contact Alicia Reese (areese@firstunitedoakpark.com) with any questions you may have.

Quest Returns in Fall 2021

The pandemic caused a year-long pause in our Quest confirmation program, but fear not: Quest will be back for the 2021-2022 program year! We are still figuring out the details, but know that the class will consist of youth in their freshman and sophomore years of high school.

If your child is interested in being a part of this coming Quest class, please reach out to Alicia Reese (areese@firstunitedoakpark.com)

We will also be looking for Friends in Faith for our Questors. If you have served in this capacity before and are interested in doing so again, or if you would like to know more about this opportunity, please reach out!

The pandemic also prevented us from having a confirmation worship service for our confirmation class of 2020. Although we were still able to confirm them into membership, the tradition and ritual of a confirmation Sunday is beloved, and we hope to plan a confirmation Sunday for those confirmands early in the next program year.

Look for communications from Art Spooner and Alicia Reese in the next few months to plan and prepare for the coming year.



For the remainder of the Program year, the youth groups will meet outside (weather permitting)! We plan to spend the bulk of our time doing activities that enable us to move around while still socially distancing as much as possible. We are happy to be able to enjoy one another's company in person again! We hope to honor our year-end traditions in new and creative ways as well as plan some group service projects over the summer.

The youth will also receive their final fun drop-off this week. This time, the packet includes soil, a small pot, wildflower seeds (to help save the bees!), water beads, a dinosaur egg, grow capsules, rainbow scratch paper, and, of course, a variety of candy! FUJI (junior high) meets from 4:30 to 6:00 p.m. FUSH (senior high) meets from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m. Our remaining dates are: May 9, 16, and 23.

COMMUNITY OF CARE

The Prayer Shawl Ministry

We continue to meet the 2nd and 4th Mondays of each month. Follow this link to join us. Reach out to Alicia Reese if you have any questions or if you know someone who would benefit from the loving care of receiving a prayer shawl.



Keeping Connected: Monthly Mailing



This month we sent out 18 packets to our “non-tech” members. We included the April Messenger Bell, five sermons, and four evotionals.

If you know of someone who would appreciate receiving this mailing, please contact Alicia

Reese (areese@firstunitedoakpark.com).

Care Opportunities

Are you looking for volunteer opportunities? Ways to feel more connected to our church family? If so, have you considered...

- Helping make homemade baked goods for those who are grieving
- Baking communion bread for some of our elderly or homebound members
- Doing drop offs of prayer shawls, or other helpful church materials

Last month our bakers delivered homemade baked goods to three grieving families and provided communion bread to several individuals.

To volunteer for any of these opportunities, or if you have any questions, please contact Alicia Reese.

Virtual Chapel for Prayer with Deacons

On Sundays, about 10 minutes after worship has ended, two deacons will be available for 30 minutes in Zoom for a more private time of prayer for those in need. They can pray with or for you, offer you a virtual blessing, and be a listening ear. Follow this [link](#) to join them.

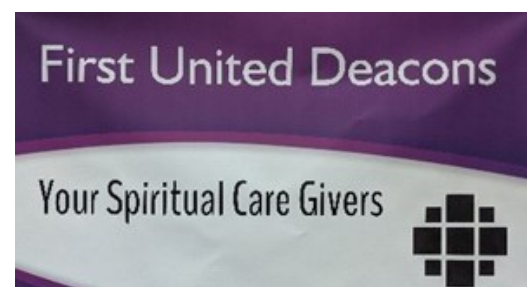


FCS: Fostering Connection & Support Drop-In



Come as you are. Come as you are able. No long term-commitment, no RSVP required!

Please join us on **Wednesdays from 9:30 to 10:30 a.m.** for an informal time of fellowship. We will use this [LINK](#) each week, so hold on to it!



If you don't know who your deacon is, please contact Alicia Reese!



We lift up the prayers that have been shared in worship.

For the wider world:

- For India, all those suffering from COVID and their loved ones
- For needed gun violence intervention
- For all those who are COVID+ and fighting for their lives
- For the front-line medical workers, overworked, exhausted, and struggling with PTSD
- For all who are hurting or suffering
- For the essential workers continuing to make everyone's lives better
- For children at the border, that they may be reunited with family
- For schools as they continue to open up and come to the end of the school year

For those in our midst:

- For the Guevara family, on the death of Janet's cousin Elmer
- For Lois Love's cousin Sue, who suffered a stroke
- For Mary Roach with health concerns
- For Betty Peaslee after a severe fall
- For Ellie Marquez's sister Dodie Scott who was diagnosed with congestive heart failure and rheumatoid arthritis
- For the Potter family while Ellie awaits her heart transplant
- For Harriet Hawkins on the death of a colleague
- For Ann Hollister's dad for struggles navigating life without his wife
- For Marina Mantel with new health challenges
- For the Nauert family on the death of beloved dog Gus

For the joys in our lives:

- For all the musicians singing and playing in Sunday worship
- For those who shared stewardship testimonies and messages in worship
- For the youth for leading a wonderful Youth Sunday worship service
- For the birthdays this month
- For the CROP walk and all the volunteers
- For gardens and gardeners
- For homemade communion bread
- For the 100th birthday of Michael Surratt's organ teacher Margaret Sandresky and the opportunity to celebrate together

CHECK OUT OUR RECENT EVOTIONALS

[Click here to read online](#)

April 6	Vitality	Ally Vertigan
April 13	How to Pray for Black Men	Lydia Mulkey
April 20	We Have All the Time We Need Here	Lydia Mulkey
April 27	Hey Siri — Set a Reminder to Talk About God	John Edgerton

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submissions

to www.firstunitedoakpark.com/eventbuilder by the 15th



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