

From Covid to Call- How First Presbyterian Green Bay Met the Challenges of Covid and an Empty Pulpit

By Bruce Deadman, Elder and PNC Chair, First Presbyterian Church Green Bay

Several weeks ago, Leslie Gunter asked me to relate the story of how our congregation faced the pandemic, and especially how we managed to seek and then call a pastor during these tumultuous times. Now that Pastor Katie's installation coming up on October 10 (**PLEASE JOIN US!!**) it's high time I wrapped this up.

As we all know, while the pandemic created unique problems for all churches, it also gave congregations like ours unexpected opportunities to expand their horizons and learn more, much more, about themselves and their faith journeys, both individually and corporately.

That was certainly the case with First Presbyterian in Green Bay. In addition to the problems faced by all congregations (no live services, no live meetings), and several "unscheduled learning opportunities" regarding technology, we were also in the middle of a search for a new pastor when the pandemic hit.

Fortunately, we had a lot going for us. For starters, our former pastor, Randy Argall, greatly improved our organizational and committee structure, and left us in a very strong position as an organized and committed congregation. In addition, he helped us discover who we really were, both individually and as a congregation, and what we had to offer to a pastor as a Christian community. Thank you, Pastor Randy!

This led our Transition Team to make the rather unusual decision not to call an interim pastor, which Presbytery approved. We felt we knew who were and what we needed to do to get through the recruitment process- and we got right to it shortly after Pastor Randy's retirement in June, 2019.

We also had tremendous support from Leslie Gunter at Presbytery as well as Meggan and Luke Farwell, the "down the road" pastors from First United Presbyterian in De Pere. Meggan, along with our own Ken Sann, were our "go to" pulpit fillers along with several of our Elders, and Luke not only moderated our Session meetings but offered wise counsel to the PNC, especially to yours truly.

We started our pastoral search in earnest in January, 2020, right about when the first stories of a virus in China were starting to surface. The experience with our first two contacts quickly persuaded us in a real big way that the day of the phone conference was over, and by late January we had shifted to a Zoom format, probably a bit ahead of the Zoom "curve".

As the pandemic crisis deepened, our Session made the “usual” decisions to suspend live worship and meetings. Our PNC represented most of our committees, and their early experience with Zoom the overall transition to Zoom meetings relatively smooth.

The same couldn't be said about our ability to conduct “virtual” worship services. Frankly, we were in the media wilderness. Once again, our De Pere friends came to the rescue and we were able to piggyback on their Facebook stream for several weeks while we learned how to conduct our own remote services. Our task quickly took on a new dimension as we synthesized work already underway to improve our sanctuary's media capabilities with the urgent need to provide a quality remote service to our congregation.

By mid-summer 2020 we were one of the first churches in the Presbytery to return to live services, although on a limited and controlled basis. We were offering our own Facebook based services and were in the midst of getting bids to literally revolutionize our in-church media worship experience. Looking back, I think this was symbolic of our overall “get it done and safely move forward” attitude towards our church life as a whole.

And all the while we were diligently searching for a pastor. To be honest, the riskiest behavior I engaged in during the whole pandemic (so far!) was to personally shepherd candidates around Green Bay! I think it's fair to say that by mid-summer our PNC was getting a bit discouraged. We had reviewed over 50 Pastor Information Forms, held some 12 initial telephone or Zoom interviews, and conducted several follow up in-person or Zoom meetings. We had some wonderful candidates, but still hadn't found that “match” we were looking for.

And then along came Katie Estes. After several Zoom meetings and a visit where we pulled out all the stops with Uncle Mike's Salted Caramel Kringle and cheese curds from the Dyckesville Bowl, we called Pastor Katie and she accepted our invitation during a joyous Saturday Zoom meeting in early September.

Great! But another set of challenges faced us as we had to figure out how to conduct a call service both live and remotely, provide for both live and remote voting, and also have our moderator appear remotely. Once again, we rose to the challenge and Pastor Katie was called last September 20.

Pastor Katie has been a real breath of fresh air for us. In true Scots Presbyterian fashion, neither she nor the congregation have let the pandemic stand in the way of getting the work of the church done. Sunday attendance, both live and remote, is up. She's getting to know us on an individual basis. Her young adult children Grace and DeShawn are valued members. We have had several live and Zoom Bible studies. We have hired a new Marketing Coordinator and are about to bring on board a CE professional. Our music program continues to flourish, although choir hasn't gone “live” yet. She has helped several families through difficult times. Our membership numbers are steady, and our books balanced. We have much to be thankful for.

In Pastor Katie, our prayers have been answered. Not prayers of desperation, mind you, but rather prayers based on positive faith and hope that God would hear and grant our prayers, and send us the right person at the right time. And that's exactly what happened.

Please join us on October 10 at 4 PM as we celebrate Pastor Katie's ministry to us and formally install her. Details may be found elsewhere in this newsletter.

God Bless!