

The HIGHLANDS Current



Cozy Tales
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Police Turn to Home Surveillance

Putnam sheriff says devices helped solve Garrison robbery

By Leonard Sparks

Home security cameras from Amazon's Ring, Google's Nest and other companies are filming more than the escapades of bears, bobcats, foxes and other wild animals.

The electronic eyes are also capturing people breaking into residences and vehicles, and stealing packages from porches, making them a technology that police agencies are turning to with increasing frequency and

privacy advocates are watching with heightened concern.

Putnam County Sheriff Kevin McConville said he was surprised that the department did not have an account set up with Neighbors, the networking app that allows Ring users to share footage with each other.

In June, Ring announced that police agencies would be allowed access to Neigh-



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ART WITH HEART — Earlier this week, with schools on break, the Garrison Art Center hosted two days of workshops for students. For more photos, see Page 17.
Photo by Ross Corsair

No Way to Right of Way Changes, Says Judge

Stops cell-tower work based on access question

By Liz Schevtchuk Armstrong

New York state court judge on Wednesday (Feb. 23) stopped Homeland Towers from transforming a right of way it needs to reach a Nelsonville cell tower site and predicted opponents of the company's access plans would prevail.

The action by Putnam County Supreme Court Judge Thomas Davis, who issued a preliminary injunction against Homeland,

came less than 24 hours after Mayor Mike Bowman told the Village Board that the cell tower firm expected in June to start construction of a 95-foot tower disguised as a fir tree. Located off Rockledge Road, a private, dead-end lane intersecting Moffatt Road, the 9.6-acre site overlooks the Cold Spring Cemetery.

Homeland's parcel can be accessed through a right of way that runs through the property of neighbors. Homeland wants to remove trees and widen and resurface the pathway and dig trenches for hundreds of

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THE Challenge FOR Churches

PART ONE



By Brian PJ Cronin

Is a church a building or the people inside?

It was the building that first drew Emily Murnane to the Dutch Reformed church on Wolcott Avenue. A lifelong Beacon resident and board member of the Beacon Historical Society, she had long admired the handsome brick building from 1860, one of the oldest churches in Beacon. But she had never seen the interior, so one day, in early 2019, she decided on a whim to attend a service.

At the time, Murnane didn't consider herself religious. She was raised Catholic, but her connection to the church was mostly cultural: She went because it was what her grandparents did.

"I put my time in, and once my time was in, I was done," she recalled. So it was curiosity instead of spirituality that led her there on a Sunday morning. She figured she'd get a chance to see the inside of the building, maybe mention the Beacon Historical Society, and be done.

She stayed for nearly five hours. The architecture had nothing to do with it.

"They fed me some great casserole," she said.

After the service, the dozen congregants in attendance invited Murnane to stay for fellowship: a potluck in the hall behind the altar that they held every week. When they learned that she was from the historical society, the stories began to unfurl about the history of the building, the congregation, and the lives

of the 12 people who still came every week to worship.

"It was like this little secret," she said. "Who would have known that this warm and wonderful group of people were hiding inside this building?"

Murnane didn't have much in common with the congregation. In her late 20s, she was the youngest person there by several decades. Also, she technically wasn't Protestant. But she said she felt welcomed in a way she hadn't felt in a church before. When she finally did leave, a member casually said to her that if she had enjoyed herself, she should consider coming back some time.

She came back every week. "I never felt like I was being preached to, or that they were trying to convert me," she said. "But I was inspired by their faith and how deeply they believed."

One of those 12 congregation members was Pat, whom Murnane had seen around Beacon almost her entire life but had known nothing about. Pat, with his beard and long hair, for years spent his day walking slowly from one end of Main Street and back, flashing the peace sign at every person he passed.

Through the church, Murnane learned a bit about Pat, about his time serving in Vietnam and some of the hardships he'd experienced. But what struck her over time was realizing that, in the part in the service when congregants would

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Why This Series?

The number of people who attend or associate with Christian denominations has been falling steadily in the U.S. for decades. As a result, many churches have closed or merged or are struggling financially, including in the Highlands. The pandemic shutdown did not help, although churches quickly adapted by broadcasting services online.

Repeated social surveys have found that, as the churchgoing population ages, younger generations are not replacing them in the pews. A growing segment of the population has been labeled “nones” — they are not atheists or even agnostics. They just don’t have religion in their lives. Sundays are the second day of the weekend.

This series will examine how this trend is affecting churches in Philipstown and Beacon, and how their leaders are attempting to grow their flocks. When Beacon, Cold Spring, Nelsonville and Garrison were founded, community life centered on the churches. What changed? What should change? What must change? If it survives, what will the church of the future look like?

Your thoughts and reactions are welcome. Email editor@highlandscurrent.org.

Chip Rowe, *Editor*

The “Halo Effect”

Should you trust surveys about church membership? While about 40 percent of Americans have consistently said in the Gallup poll that they are “regular churchgoers,” studies that extrapolate from head counts in the pews put the figure closer to 20 percent. Researchers suspect that people exaggerate their attendance, just as they exaggerate how often they vote and downplay how much they drink.

Shifting Beliefs

78% Americans in 2007 who identified as Christian

▼ **63%** in 2021

16% Americans in 2007 who identified as “nones”

▲ **29%** in 2021

Source: Pew Research Center



The Rev. Steve Schunk inside St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Cold Spring

Photo by Ross Corsair

Churches *(from Page 1)*

offer up the names of people to pray for, Pat never asked for prayers for himself or someone he was close to. Instead he would ask the congregation to pray for someone in town who had just lost their mother, or a family he’d read about in the paper that was experiencing hardships, or someone else he’d heard about via word-of-mouth. “He was probably the most Christ-like person I ever met,” she said.

But there is only so much that a small congregation can do in terms of fundraising, of serving the community, of finding members. Their ministry work in the community had dwindled down to feeding Pat every day.

When the Reformed Church was built 162 years ago on what was then known as Fish-kill Landing, churches were the centerpiece of communities. The Reformed Church was designed to hold 200 people. Even before the pandemic shutdown, members of the congregation would look up at the cavernous space around them and ask themselves: How much longer can we keep this up?

Their pastor, Jan Fritzinger, remembered congregants telling her that in the 1950s, every pew would be full. But now? “You put 10 people in a seating capacity of 200, they’re lost,” she said.

The heart of the village

One doesn’t have to be religious to appreciate what a church brings to a community. “You have all these wonderful buildings, historical structures, they’re beautiful and add such character to any village,” said Mark Forlow.

But as Forlow knows from his time as a vestry member of St. Mary’s Episcopal

Church in Cold Spring, taking care of those structures can be a trial. St. Mary’s was built in 1867, a few years after the Reformed Church in Beacon. Like that structure, St. Mary’s was the second church built by the congregation. The Reformed Church started in 1813 and St. Mary’s was founded in 1840. Both congregations left their first churches to build the larger, grander ones that still stand.

They were built to inspire. They were not built to be energy efficient.

“The furnace was 40 years old, so every year, we put money into the furnace,” said Fritzinger about the Reformed Church in Beacon. “It was all on one zone. And when you have an old church like that, there are lots of repairs.”

Historic churches “are a huge suck in terms of your resources, heating them, the electricity, the maintenance,” said Forlow. “They are very, very needy structures.” One of the first projects that he took part in upon joining the church was getting the steeple repointed. The congregation had to raise \$250,000.

“We got it done — great,” he said. “Now you got the rest of the building. Then you’ve got the parish hall.” The church isn’t insulated, and its windows aren’t tight. “It seems like the oil burner is on all day long, and the heat just goes right up through the roof,” he said.

When the organ needed repairs, parishioners had to learn how to do the costly work themselves. Both churches predate the Americans with Disabilities Act by at least 120 years, and had to be brought up to code.

These are daunting enough projects for a large congregation. For a small one, they become impossible. The financial crash of 2008 hit the St. Mary’s endowment hard,

and the church spent the next 10 years flirting with bankruptcy. There was discussion of how much the church could get if it were to sell its rolling 1.5-acre lawn in the heart of the village to a developer. The assessment came back at just under \$3 million.

In 2018, in order to survive, they had to let go their full-time rector, Father Shane Scott-Hamblen, who had been with the church since 2002 and had rebuilt the congregation from an average of seven members at Mass to 50. A statement from St. Mary’s at the time called the decision to do so “difficult and without pleasure, but it was a necessary decision in order for the parish to continue.”

This was the environment that Rev. Steve Schunk, the part-time priest-in-charge at St. Mary’s, came into: The pain of a popular rector being let go, and the constant worry about the church’s dire finances.

“I thought St. Mary’s was on the brink but not just from money,” he said. “There was a lot of hurt in the parish. That’s what I thought not only in the parish, but I think even in the community. So I think my first thing to do was simply to love them. And just lead them out. I hope and I think we’ve stopped the leak in the boat. I think we’re on a positive cash basis.”

Still, he wonders why more people from the village aren’t spending their Sundays here. And because he’s only in the village part-time, he worries that he’s not in the community enough to figure it out.

“I think St. Mary’s is being taken for granted,” he said. “But how do I tell that story? If St. Mary’s is important to you in the community, you have to be like our parishioners and pledge. How do I get that story across?”

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Forlow remembers an Australian couple a few years ago who were visiting the Hudson Valley, happened to attend a service at St. Mary’s because they were walking by and were charmed by the building. They enjoyed themselves so much that they flew back to Cold Spring every other month to attend services.

“I loved the story, but it was hilarious,” he said. “Where are the people in the village? If we had 100 to 150 people in the village come to St. Mary’s? I have no doubt that there would be a different experience.”

Both Forlow and Schunk worry that the Christianity that the public sees in the national media — the scandals, the exclusion, the rise of Christian nationalism — is keeping people away from local churches, “especially people who are not churched, people who don’t have the experience,” Forlow said. “Liberty University, give me a break. And they associate St. Mary’s or the Methodist church or the Presbyterian with Liberty University. We’re not that, you know, and that’s the hardest thing to overcome. But how do you say that to somebody? How do you expose them to religion and community and worship and have it be meaningful to their lives? This culture that we have could certainly benefit from people just stopping, taking a step back, and looking at what’s important.”

Even harder than bringing the unchurched into the flock is getting people who have left to return. St. Mary’s prides itself on being an inclusive and welcoming community, but Schunk knows that there are those who have been “spiritually wounded” by traumatic experiences with other religious institutions. “The church became anti-women, anti-gay, all this,” he said. “Sometimes if a person feels bad, and they go to a lot of therapy, they ask, ‘Why did the church make me feel this way?’ How am I ever going to get that person to come back?”

Exile and return

In Beacon, Emily Murnane tried to convince her friends to attend services at the Reformed Church, hoping that an infusion of young members could sustain the congregation. “It’s a free breakfast, just come in, meet the people,” she remembers telling them. “You’re going to be inspired.”

No one joined her. Some needed those Sunday mornings to catch up on sleep. Others were put off by the religious aspect, “which kind of sucks when you’re trying to convince people to come to a church,” she said. “But there was that overarching specter of organized religion that was making them believe that ‘this is going to be boring, it’s going to be a responsibility, it’s going to be spooky.’”

Finally, a few months into the pandemic, the congregation realized that they could not afford to keep going. They held a final service in May 2021. Past members and former pastors returned. The theme of the service was the resurrection. They spoke of exile from Egypt, the uncertainty of the wilderness, and then finally finding the promised land. They spoke of Jesus revealing himself to his disciples three days after being crucified, when all hope had been lost. And they performed the Rite of Passage to New Forms of Ministry, in which the congregants were urged to find a new place of worship where they may be encouraged in their faith.

For Murnane, that hasn’t happened. She hasn’t gone to another church. Instead, she’s been busy scanning and digitizing the church’s historical records for the Beacon Historical Society. The church is in contract to be sold and transformed into a venue for live performances with a bar and a hotel.

She has not lost hope. She’s encouraged that the developers have been speaking with her about the site’s history and ways in which they can preserve it. They plan to restore the historic cemetery, which is over-

grown and inaccessible. “They care about that property, and they have the motivation and the resources to take care of it,” she said. “If it has to be a music venue, then it couldn’t have ended up in better hands.”

And both Munrane and Pastor Fritzinger are glad to see that, until the sale is finalized, another religious group is using the church. Goodwill Church, an evangelical organization with three churches in Orange County, has been renting the space since June.

Fritzinger, who is serving as a part-time pastor in Hyde Park, was shocked to learn that Goodwill is bringing in 70 people every week. Larger churches can afford the marketing and other resources it takes to grow. In this case, she learned that the members attending weren’t local. They were “church plants” from one of the other three churches on the other side of the river.

“They take people from other congregations of theirs that are willing to go to a new church, and they plant them in there for a few weeks, and then spread the word out,” she said. “That’s the marketing.”

Murnane worries about the stories that will now be lost. Once the records she’s handling have been digitized, the originals will be sent to the governing body of the Reformed Church and they’ll lie dormant until someone else comes looking for them. Then there are the practical considerations of what happens to a city when a community within it dissolved.

“That was a community of open, welcoming, warm people who did everything in their power, what little power they had for their community,” she said. “Here’s a place where you can talk about what’s going on in your life. We’re not going to ask any questions. We don’t demand that you be a certain way. You just, you know, just come in, say what you need to say, spend some time with us. We don’t care who you are, we don’t care what you are, we don’t care why you are. Just come in and join us. We’re short on places like that, in Beacon and in the world.”

The Reformed Church and St. Mary’s are not unique. Many churches in the Highlands struggle with filling pews, raising money, patching walls, figuring out the spiritual and logistical needs of their congregation, and discovering the role of religion during a time of polarization and pandemics. If fewer Americans are defining themselves as Christians — or religious at all — what does that mean for the church in general?

Over the next few weeks, *The Current* will look at some of the problems local churches are dealing with, and some of the solutions they’ve discovered. When we conceived this series before the pandemic, the working titles were *Are Churches Dying?* or *The Church in Crisis*. But in the process of reporting, it became clear that neither title was accurate. Churches do close. Congregations disperse. But on the whole, many churches are dealing with their challenges by changing what it means to be part of a church.

In some ways, instead of a decline, the church may be getting back to its roots.

“Christ didn’t have a megachurch,” said Fritzinger. “He had 12 ragged disciples.”

How Diverse is the Hudson Valley?

In a study released last year, the research firm PRRI ranked each county in the U.S. for religious diversity. The index is calculated so that a score of 1 would indicate that every religious group is of equal size, while a score of 0 indicates that one religious group comprises the entire population. The average score in the U.S. is 0.625. Diversity is highest in urban areas and lowest in the South and rural areas.

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|------------------|-------|
| Rockland..... | 0.869 |
| Orange..... | 0.846 |
| Westchester..... | 0.842 |
| Ulster..... | 0.824 |
| Dutchess..... | 0.800 |
| Putnam..... | 0.776 |

Christian Portrait

White Christians
Dutchess 53%
Putnam 53%
Lyon County, Iowa 87%

White Evangelical
Dutchess 7%
Putnam 3%
Marion County, Alabama 64%

White Protestant
Dutchess 17%
Putnam 12%
Pope County, Minnesota 37%

White Catholic
Dutchess 29%
Putnam 38%
Dubuque County, Iowa 45%

Black Protestant
Dutchess 6%
Putnam 1%
Holmes County, Mississippi 68%

Hispanic Protestant
Dutchess 2%
Putnam 3%
Hidalgo County, Texas 21%

Hispanic Catholic
Dutchess 5%
Putnam 7%
Zapata County, Texas 59%

Nones
Dutchess 26%
Putnam 26%
San Juan County, Washington 49%

Source: *The American Religious Landscape in 2020*, PRRI (July 8, 2021) The other counties shown are those with the highest percentage.



The Rev. Jan Fritzinger, the last pastor at the Reformed Church of Beacon, is now serving a congregation in Hyde Park. Photo by Ross Corsair

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Artists in
Bloom
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A woman shows her support for Ukraine during a rally in Times Square on Feb. 26.
Photo by David Delgado/Reuters

Russia Invasion Hits Home

Local Ukrainians fear for country, family and friends

By Leonard Sparks

The invasion by Russia of neighboring Ukraine on Feb. 24 is being felt in the Highlands, where Ukrainian-Americans have been watching the destruction of cities within their country unfold on television, on social media and

in anguished phone calls and texts from family and friends. They say they are angry over the military action and fear for relatives and friends but also feel pride at the resistance by the Ukrainian military and armed civilians. For weeks, Yuriy Herhel and his wife, Melissa, who own the Fred Astaire Dance Studio on Route 9 in Philipstown, had urged his mother to leave Ukraine as
(Continued on Page 21)

Schools Unmask

State says face coverings now optional

By Jeff Simms

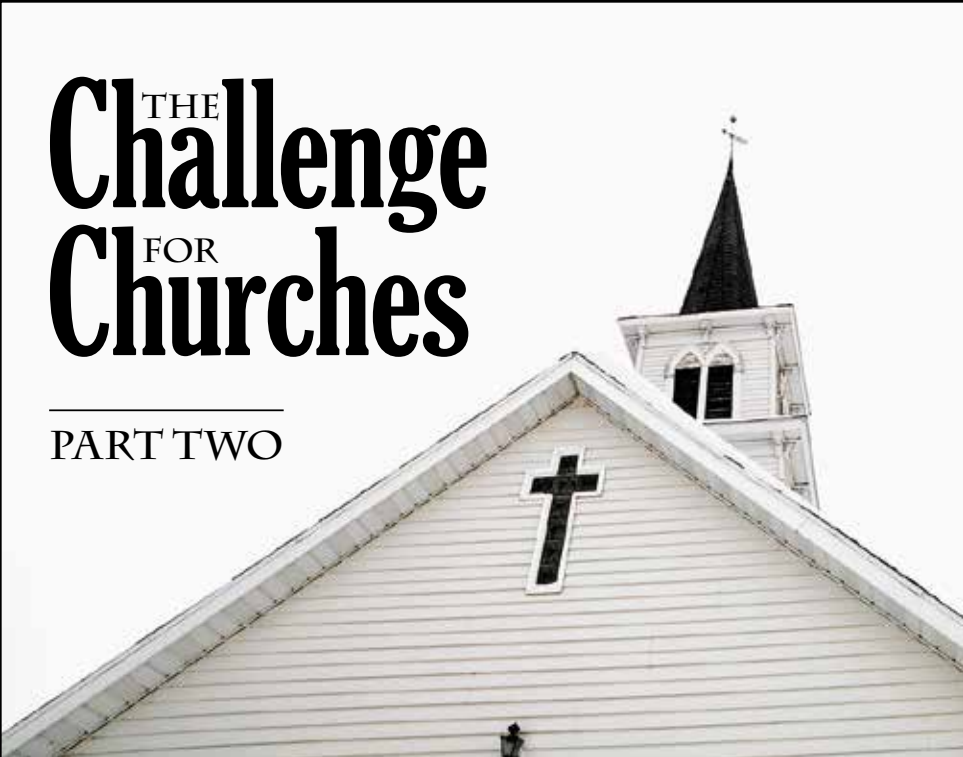
Gov. Kathy Hochul lifted the state's mask requirement for public and private schools this week, 18 months after students and teachers returned to in-person classes following the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown. Hochul lifted the mandate as of Wednesday (March 2), following the introduction by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) of new metrics for tracking transmission of the coronavirus. Rather than relying on case counts, the agency said it would use three indicators to assess risk at the community level: new cases, new hospitalizations and hospital capacity. According to a tool developed by the CDC, Dutchess and Putnam counties are both considered "low" risk — a category



Two students walk home from Beacon High School on Tuesday (March 1); the state lifted a mask mandate for schools beginning the next day. Photo by Valerie Shively
in which the agency recommends that people stay up-to-date with vaccines and get tested if they show symptoms. Hochul noted that New York has had a 98
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THE Challenge FOR Churches

PART TWO



By Brian PJ Cronin

The Rev. Amanda Eiman was not looking for a new church. She was firmly ensconced as an associate rector at St. David's Episcopal Church in an affluent suburb of Philadelphia. In a time at which many churches are losing parishioners and funds, this one boasted a large, steady congregation with several other priests and paid staff members. Her husband, the Rev. Chris Bishop, was serving as a rector at another Episcopal church nearby. And she was four-and-a-half months pregnant with twins. So there was no logical reason to consider it when one of her fellow priests mentioned that a friend of his attended a church 150 miles away, in the hamlet of Garrison, New York, that was on the lookout for a successor to its pastor, who had retired. Was she interested in applying? She was not. "I said, 'No way, we're not moving anywhere,'" she recalled. And yet: She felt an urge to learn more, an urge she now views as "God's nudge." The Garrison church had a lot going for it. Founded in 1771, it was almost burned down during the Revolutionary War by colonials who considered it excessively loyal to the king of England. As the story goes, when the mob approached the building, they were turned away by Gen. George Washington himself, who admonished the crowd by yelling, "That, sir, is my church!" In the past 60 years the church had

only had two pastors, a sign of stability spanning generations. And the congregation was growing, with families with young children flocking there even though it was in a transitional phase. "That's not usually the case," she said. "When a priest who's been at a church for a long time leaves, usually it's a time of sadness, of trying to regroup." Eiman told herself she wasn't going to leave St. David's unless she ended up somewhere where, as she put it, "God was doing something special." As she visited and spoke to members, she felt that was the case. What's more, she felt that God wanted her to be there, as well. And so, in January 2020, Eiman became the 28th pastor — and the first female one — in the 251-year history of St. Philip's Episcopal Church. The global pandemic shutdown was two months away. God may be doing something special at St. Philip's, but Eiman found that many of the reasons that it was attracting new congregants were quite down-to-earth. Like her previous church, St. Philip's has an ample staff who could take care of basic necessities like updating the website, answering the phone and greeting any unfamiliar worshippers who walked in on a Sunday morning. "Sometimes drawing people in or growing your church isn't rocket science," she said. "I can't tell you how many times I've
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Why This Series?

The number of people who attend or associate with Christian denominations has been falling steadily in the U.S. for decades. As a result, many churches have closed or merged or are struggling financially, including in the Highlands. The pandemic shutdown did not help, although churches quickly adapted by broadcasting services online.

Repeated social surveys have found that, as the churchgoing population ages, younger generations are not replacing them in the pews. A growing segment of the population has been labeled “nones” — they are not atheists or even agnostics. They just don’t have religion in their lives. Sundays are the second day of the weekend.

This series is examining how this trend is affecting churches in Philipstown and Beacon, and how their leaders are attempting to grow their flocks. When Beacon, Cold Spring, Nelsonville and Garrison were founded, community life centered on the churches. What changed? What should change? What must change? If it survives, what will the church of the future look like?

Your thoughts and reactions are welcome. Email me at editor@highlandscurrent.org.

Chip Rowe, *Editor*

Why Do You Go?

- 81% Be closer to God
- 68% Give children moral foundation
- 66% Comfort in time of sorrow
- 19% Meet new people
- 16% Please my family or partner

Source: Pew Research Center

Who Doesn’t Go?

A 2017 Pew Research Study survey found that Americans who say they do not attend church because they don’t believe tend to be younger, more highly educated, mostly men and Democratic voters.

Those who do not attend services for other reasons tend to be older, less highly educated, mostly women and less likely to vote Democratic.

Churches (from Page 1)

heard stories like: ‘Well, I tried to go to this church, so I left a voicemail on their parish administrator’s voicemail, and I never heard back.’ Or: ‘I couldn’t find their worship times on their website,’ or ‘I went to the church, and nobody said hello to me.’ How awful is that?”

When the pandemic struck, St. Philip’s secured video cameras and personnel to livestream empty-chapel services. Even after in-person services resumed, it continued livestreaming and added video messages in its weekly email newsletters. It found that the livestreams and videos were a way for those who had moved away to feel connected to the parish, for homebound members to take part, and as an introduction for the curious, some of whom later took a seat in the pews.

Eiman said there’s a dispiriting Catch-22 at the heart of this. In order for a church to increase its congregants and revenues, it first has to have enough congregants and revenue. Churches that could afford, in equipment and labor, to smoothly livestream services during the pandemic were able to entice new members. Those that couldn’t, didn’t. Big churches get bigger, and small churches disappear.

On one hand, everything is working at St. Philip’s. In the past two years, Eiman estimates that the church has attracted about 50 new people.

But the numbers are about the same as they were when she arrived once you factor in the people who, since she began, have left.

A church in the wild

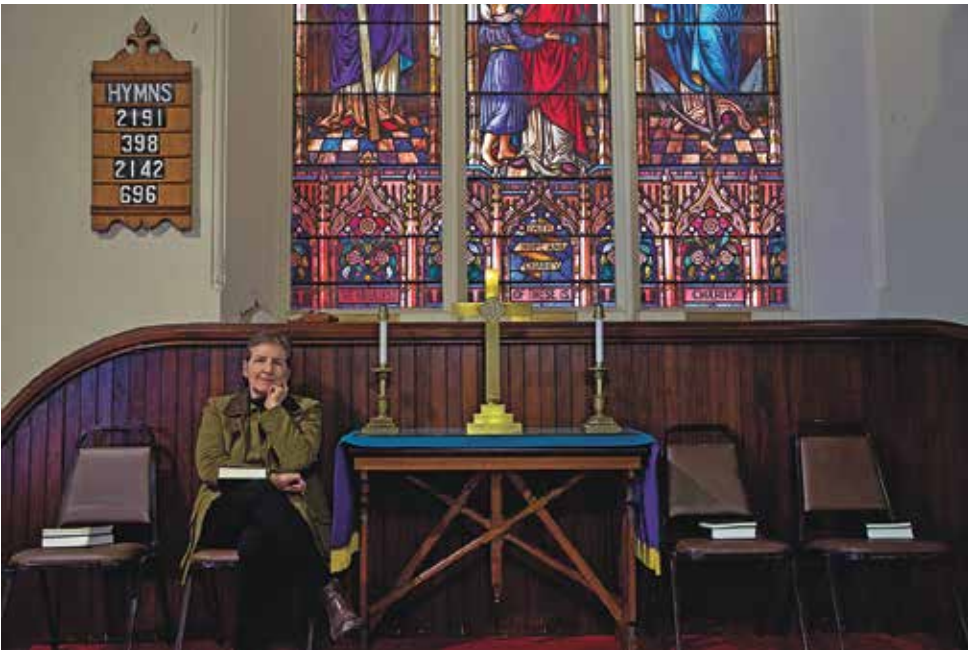
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Last week we looked at the struggles of the Reformed Church in Beacon, which closed last year because of a lack of congregants, and St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in Cold Spring, which nearly closed. This week we examine two cases in which Highlands residents are deciding how much religion they want in their religion.

When Friedrike Merck first came to Garrison six years ago, her friend Anne Osborn invited her to sing in the St. Philip’s choir. There was one problem.

“I said to her, ‘Annie, I’m a Buddhist agnostic,’ ” she recalled. “Annie said, ‘Oh, we don’t care. Many of us are any number of things. We are here in fellowship, and we’re here to be together.’ That’s who welcomed me. And I’ve never been so welcomed in a community in my life.”



Friedrike Merck, president of the Highlands Choral Society, which rents the former South Highland United Methodist Church in Garrison

Photo by Ross Corsair

What We Believe

(NEW YORK EDITION)

- 67% Say they believe in heaven
- 49% Say they believe in hell
- 56% “Absolutely certain” of God
- 21% “Fairly certain”
- 49% Rely on “common sense” for right/wrong
- 25% Rely on religion
- 48% Pray at least daily
- 30% Say humans have always existed in present form
- 29% Attend church at least weekly
- 24% Consider Bible to be literal word of God

Source: “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” Pew Research Center, 2015

Things changed when the new rector arrived. Merck said that for her and the majority of the choir at St. Philip’s, it didn’t feel like home anymore.

In a way, Eiman isn’t surprised. The St. Philip’s congregation was growing, but it was still a traumatic time with the previous, beloved rector retiring after 30 years and then the pandemic closing off in-person services for six months.

“There was a lot of trauma there, especially when you then throw in this new person who is basically unlike the old pastor in every way, shape and form,” Eiman said. “But how I really differed

from the former rector is that I talk about Jesus and I talk about the Trinity and my sermons are very scripturally based.”

Eiman didn’t feel that by reintroducing Jesus and scripture into the worship services that she wasn’t being inclusive.

“I believe that Christianity and Christian communities are very inclusive and very loving,” she said. “Jesus was one of the most inclusive beings who has ever lived.”

But a portion of the congregation felt that the services were becoming too doctrinal. Tensions grew, and in late 2020, the long-time music director resigned and nearly the entire choir, including Merck, left with him.

Merck said that the people who left wanted to stay together, and that they wanted to continue singing together. It was, in singing together, that they felt a connection to the divine.

“Sacred music isn’t just a bunch of people getting together, strumming a guitar and feeling groovy,” she said. “Sacred music is an extraordinary thing. One of the reasons Bach is one of the greatest composers who ever lived is because his compositions, which were mostly sacred music, really reflect the complexity of the heavens, and the beauty of the heavens. And when people sing beautiful music, it’s connected to something bigger than us.”

With the recent merging of two Methodist congregations in Philipstown — United Methodist in Cold Spring and South Highland United Methodist in Garrison — the latter church was not being used. Redubbed The Highlands Chapel, it is now filled every Sunday with the Highlands Choral Society, a group that is mostly made up of St. Philip’s former music director and its former choir.

Merck serves as president. “What we have is an opportunity, and a safe place for people of various faiths and philosophies to come together, in fellowship, in song, in prayer and in meditation,” she said.

The services may have a basic Christian structure, but there is no priest. Readings from the Bible are sometimes given, but so are the writings of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh.

“It’s about how people can come together

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to do good, to worship, to have a spiritual life without demanding that they either be baptized, or that they believe in certain things or not,” Merck said.

Merck thinks that the Highlands Choral Society’s members are indicative of a religious — or non-religious — trend. Many people, she thinks, want a more spiritual life but are turned off by organized religion. She points to Harvard University, where the chaplains at the Ivy League school unanimously elected Greg Epstein, an atheist and author of *Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe*, to serve as the president of their society.

“I’m sick of ‘othering,’ ” said Merck. “Instead, we are about gathering.”

While the split may have been painful, both sides claim to be turning the other cheek. “We consider St. Philip’s and the Highlands Choral Society to be mutually respectful entities,” said Merck. “But we’re freestanding from each other. We just have different paths.”

Eiman said that since many of the people who left the church don’t consider themselves to be Christian, it’s understandable that they would seek a different experience. “I know that they just want to gather and sing and do something a little bit different,” she said. “God bless you if that’s what you want to do. But that’s not really Episcopalian, and we’re an Episcopal church.”

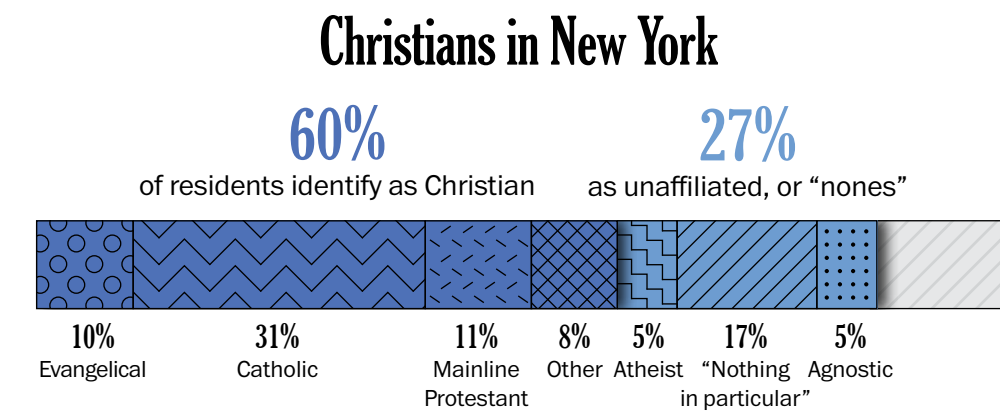
She cautions against organized churches who might follow a similar path. Many churches, she said, in the 1990s downplayed Jesus and the Scriptures in a bid to bring more people to the pews. It worked at first, she said, but then attendance began to decline. People who had come to the church for a spiritual experience weren’t getting it. For them, there was no difference between church and any other gathering of people.

This is one of the main questions Eiman said church leaders are asking themselves: What is their Christian mission?

“If you lose your mission, you just become a social club,” she said.

A forgotten language

Mary Ann Kronk, who lives in Cold



Spring, is a lifelong Catholic who has felt her own challenges in determining what she wants from worship — and found herself going in a different direction, to a far more ritualized, traditional service that the Catholic church has mostly abandoned.

She had grown up being taught that you don’t shop around. If you thought the priest was not such a great speaker, or that his homilies were uninspiring, you still came every Sunday.

“We’ve lost our ability to pray. We haven’t grown up watching our parents deep in prayer, our grandparents deep in prayer.”

~ Mary Ann Kronk

“You’re not there for the priest, you’re there for the Mass,” she said. “And the Mass is the Mass.”

But three years ago, Kronk found that, for her, the Mass was not just the Mass. She was invited to hear a Mass in High Latin at a Catholic church just outside the Highlands.

The 1960s were a period of radical change in the Catholic church. After hundreds of years of the Mass being in Latin, the Vatican declared that parishes should now use local, vernacular languages. As a result, the majority of U.S. churches began celebrating

the Mass in English.

Further reforms quickly followed, including simplifying the rituals and turning the priest to face the congregation, as opposed to standing with his back to the pews.

Many Catholics welcomed these changes, feeling that they made the Mass more inclusive. But some felt that Mass became less spiritual, and that the aesthetics were altered in a way that made it less effective as a religious experience.

Today, High Latin Masses are unusual because few Catholic priests know Latin. The pontifical universities in Rome stopped teaching it more than 50 years ago.

So it was mostly historical curiosity that drove Kronk to forgo Our Lady of Loretto in Cold Spring for a week to check out the High Latin mass. The priest that would be presiding promised Kronk that it would change her life. “Oh Father, you are being so dramatic,” she said.

But he was right. “If you just go to regular Mass, you can sit through it for 45 minutes, and you don’t even have to think about it very much,” she said. “You’ve done your duty and you’re gone. But in the Latin Mass, you’re more committed because there’s a lot of silence. You have to engage or it’s not going to do anything for you.”

The experience was so powerful that when she walked out of the church, she found herself angry. “I thought, ‘Why did they take this away from us?’ This was the missing piece of the puzzle. This is what I’d been looking for.”

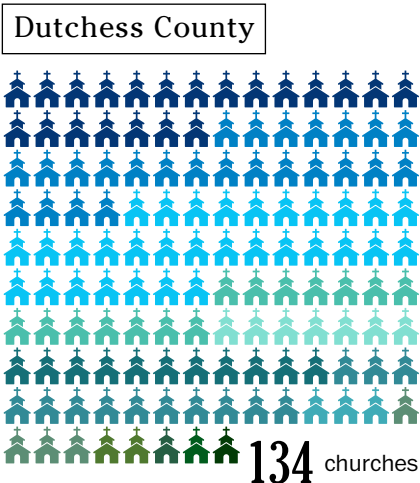
She told the priest how she felt, and he offered an explanation. Traditionally, Mass is a “vertical experience,” with prayers from the priest and the congregation going up to God, and “God coming down into our hearts.” But over time, the Catholic liturgy had become a “horizontal experience” from the priest to the congregation. At the Latin Mass, Kronk didn’t feel like a spectator; she was praying *with* the priest, both of them speaking to God.

She is not doctrinal. But she said she now understands why some people who return to the church in times of crisis, thinking it will help, come away empty. She understands why they feel that the experience was silly, awkward or ineffective.

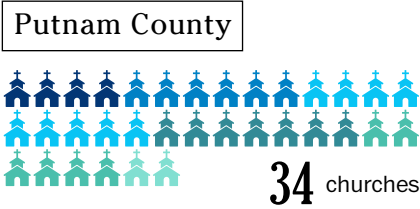
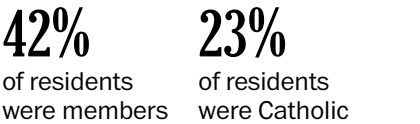
“We’ve lost our ability to pray,” she said. “We haven’t grown up watching our parents deep in prayer, our grandparents deep in prayer. So it’s very foreign to us.”

Her advice to those who feel adrift is to find someone who will teach you how to pray. But, she also thinks that prayer doesn’t have to look the way it does in a

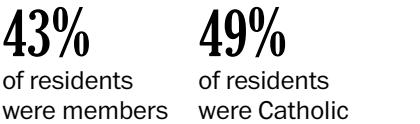
Church Membership in 1952



- 30,915 Catholic (21 churches)
- 8,295 Episcopal (25)
- 6,881 Methodist (31)
- 3,517 Presbyterian (14)
- 2,671 Lutheran (7)
- 2,271 Reformed (11)
- 1,439 Baptist (13)
- 714 Congregational (3)
- 621 Quakers (4)
- 124 Assemblies of God (2)
- 79 Seventh-Day Adventists (1)
- 59 Church of the Nazarene (1)
- 27 Unitarian (1)



- 4,352 Catholic (4 churches)
- 1,394 Episcopal (6)
- 1,317 Methodist (9)
- 735 Baptist (7)
- 649 Presbyterian (6)
- 378 Lutheran (2)



Source: National Council of Churches



The Rev. Amanda Eiman of St. Philip’s Episcopal Church offered “ashes to go” at the Garrison train station on Ash Wednesday (March 2).

Photo by Daniel Bentley

The HIGHLANDS Current



MARCH 11, 2022

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Scam Encounters

Residents snared by fake stories, phony landlords

By Leonard Sparks

It started with a daytime call in January to Mary Sue Kelly's house.

A man identifying himself as a police officer spun a tale: The Beacon resident's son had been in an accident in Hartford, Connecticut; he admitted being on his cellphone while driving; a pregnant woman riding with him had been hospitalized; and her son could be charged with reckless endangerment.

Kelly was instructed to gather \$9,500 for bail and given a number to call back. Distraught and shaking when she entered her

bank, Kelly told an employee there that her son had been in an accident and she needed cash right away. A teller was about to hand over the money when Kelly's phone rang. It was her son — safe and calling from his home.

"I just broke down; I started crying," recalled Kelly, 77. "It was such a release that he was OK."

She was lucky.

In a world gone virtual, grifters have transitioned from analog schemes to digital ones, wielding modern tools that allow them to easily create fake profiles, instantly reach millions of people and steal or buy people's personal data, all without leaving their keyboards.

(Continued on Page 6)



LET THE CHIPS FALL — Ice sculptor Bill Bywater adds detail to his emerging fish at a gathering last month to honor the education staff at the Hudson Highlands Nature Museum in Cornwall.

Photo by Ross Corsair

'Good Cause' Passes in Beacon

Council adopts measure after months of discussion

By Jeff Simms

Beacon became the fifth municipality in New York state on Monday (March 7) to enact "good-cause" eviction legislation.

The council voted 6-1 to adopt the law after a nearly four-hour public hearing that began on Feb. 22 and continued into Monday night. Residents who addressed the council about the measure voiced support by a 3-to-1 margin. Mayor Lee Kyri-

acou, who is a member of the council, voted "no," saying he felt it would not help the renters who need assistance most.

Beacon joins Newburgh, Poughkeepsie, Kingston and Albany in adopting the legislation. Officials in Albany are defending a lawsuit from landlords; Hudson adopted a law last year but its mayor vetoed it a month later.

The law exempts landlords who own fewer than four apartments and live on-site.

Among other provisions, it will require landlords to demonstrate "good cause" before a judge can begin eviction proceed-

(Continued on Page 21)

THE Challenge FOR Churches

PART THREE



By Brian PJ Cronin

It's Thursday morning at Cold Spring's United Methodist Church, and the prayer shawl ministry is in session. More than a dozen women are crowded around tables. Their handiwork will be donated. Some weeks it's caps for infants, others it's blankets for a veteran's hospital. Whatever's being made is "infused" with prayer by the women so that, the Rev. Micah Coleman Campbell explains, whoever receives it will know someone is praying for them.

Not everyone who shows up on Thursdays shows up on Sundays. The prayer shawl ministry wasn't created to attract members; it's a way to spread good work and build community, Coleman Campbell said. There are practical benefits. One week, a member of the group fell in her home. She was rescued because an alarm was raised when she didn't show up to crochet.

Still, a few members of the group have started attending services. When you are only seeing a dozen congregants, a handful of new faces are noticed. It's a welcome boost for a church that only exists because of a merger. A few years ago, Cold Spring United Methodist merged with South Highlands United Methodist because of low membership in both congregations. The South Highlands church is now rented out. Other churches in the Highlands, including the Episcopal and Catholic churches in Beacon, also have merged to survive.

Many churches struggle with filling pews, raising money, patching walls, figuring out the spiritual and logistical needs of their congregation and discovering the role of religion during a time of polarization and pandemics. If, as surveys show, fewer Americans are defining themselves as Christians — or religious at all — what does that mean for the church in general?

In the first two parts of this series, we looked at the struggles of the Reformed Church in Beacon, which closed last year because of a lack of congregants; St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Cold Spring, which nearly closed; and philosophical differences that fueled a split at St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Garrison. This week, we examine churches that are surviving by building community through acts of service and by fighting for social justice, hoping to counter misconceptions about who is welcome in the pews.

The Bible and the newspaper

Church attendance has fallen sharply nationwide over the decades but perhaps, Coleman Campbell suggests, the golden age of packed pews wasn't so golden.

"It's not like back in the day, everybody loved being in church and everybody believed 100 percent," he said. "It was just that those who didn't believe or didn't love being there didn't feel like they had a choice. They couldn't opt

(Continued on Page 8)

Churches *(from Page 1)*

out of going because of societal pressure or whatnot. Now people feel more free to make that choice. That's a good thing. I don't want anyone forced to their faith."

He speaks from personal experience, despite — or perhaps, because of — being the son of two Methodist pastors, and his father being a fifth-generation minister. Coleman Campbell had no intention of following in those footsteps. His goal was to be a high school history teacher. He had seen, up close, how hard it was to be a pastor and wasn't sure that he had it in him.

"There are a million ways in which we are broken," he said. "And we are called, as pastors, to wade into that brokenness. That's a rewarding call, but it's scary. And sometimes we're not entirely sure that we're up to the challenge."

Yet, after graduating from college, Coleman Campbell realized that fear wasn't a good enough reason to resist the call. Today, he serves as a pastor both in Cold Spring and at Fishkill United Methodist Church.

As in Cold Spring, the Fishkill church has found itself increasing in membership over the past two years. Unlike Cold Spring, Coleman Campbell hasn't been able to figure out why.

"It's not like we had some awesome new initiative," he said. "For whatever reason, the spirit led them through the doors there." He credits the welcoming nature of his congregation for bringing curious new attendees back.

As to why more people aren't coming through the doors, Coleman Campbell thinks it's not just because of the lack of societal pressure. The Christian church in general, he allows, has not done a good job of confronting the issues of the 21st, or even the 20th, century. It has tried to ignore the philosophical ramifications of advancements in science and our understanding of the universe. In his view, instead of trying to reconcile the worlds of science and miracles, the church has pushed them apart, and set them in opposition to one another.

"If I had grown up in a church or been around Christians who had told me to shut off my mind, in some ways, I hope I would have also walked away," he said. "A faith that's not willing to think critically is not appealing to me, either."

This past fall, Coleman Campbell was among seven Philipstown clergy members who issued a joint statement urging the public to consider joining them in increasing their efforts in fighting climate change as part of the Philipstown Fights Dirty campaign.

"We realize that in this worldwide calamity, no one is safe until everyone is safe, that our actions really do affect one another, and that what we do today affects what happens tomorrow," read the statement, in part. "May we not waste this moment! We must decide what kind of world we want to leave to future generations."

"How we treat the Earth is vitally important to God, and to our continued existence," said Coleman Campbell. "Being faithful stewards of God's creation is bound up in our call as Christians. You can't



The Rev. Micah Coleman Campbell at the Cold Spring United Methodist Church

Photo by Ross Corsair

disconnect that from our faith."

Climate change isn't the only issue Coleman Campbell is addressing from the pulpit. As part of an initiative put forward by the New York Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, he's begun addressing issues of racial justice.

Reactions have been mixed. At any congregation in which Coleman Campbell has brought up such issues, some members have told him that they feel addressing climate change and race is long overdue. Others have told him that the church should stay out of politics, a view he describes as "hogwash."

Far from it being an inappropriate topic, Coleman argues that white pastors in predominantly white congregations are in a unique position to address issues of race. If those uncomfortable conversations can't happen in the house of the Lord, then where are they supposed to take place?

"It's usually people who are, like me, white people or people in privileged positions who don't want to deal with race," he said. "They're uncomfortable with it. But they're more inclined to listen to somebody like me, than somebody not like me. And it is both my obligation and my duty to try and bring those people in. I try hard to push people, but in a way that is not condemning or judgmental. A lot of times when people shut down and don't want to talk about race, one of the reasons is because they feel like they've been condemned. They're more willing to wade into uncomfortable waters if they feel like the person inviting them into that difficult space is not condemning and believes in their capacity to do right."

He is not the only local clergy member to feel this way.

"When you preach each Sunday, you need

Talking About Race

41% Christians who believe there is racism in the church

59% Non-religious Americans who say this

17% Christians who say churches talk about racism to make people feel bad about themselves

44% Christians who say talking about racism divides people

75% Black Americans who say fighting racism is essential to their faith

73% Percentage who say believing in God is essential to their faith

Sources: (1) "Jesus in America," a survey of 3,119 Americans conducted by Ipsos for The Episcopal Church, released March 9, (2) "Faith Among Black Americans," Pew Research Center, 2020

to have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other hand," said Erik Simon, the interim pastor at the First Presbyterian Church of Beacon, citing the theologian Karl Barth. "If you're not engaged in what's going on in your society, you're not doing what Jesus asked you to do."

A welcoming table

Simon had no intention of taking a pastorship in Beacon.

A writer and communications consultant

who was called to the ministry in middle age, he had just finished serving as an interim pastor in Yonkers and had been offered an assignment at a church that he was looking forward to being a part of.

But he was invited by the regional presbytery to speak with the session, or governing body, of the First Presbyterian Church of Beacon. He knew the church was going through a bumpy transition, having recently lost a beloved pastor to a move, and it hadn't found the right person to replace him for the long term. The first replacement pastor hadn't worked out. Members of the congregation who were ordained had been filling in. It was in a tough spot. Simon certainly couldn't turn down their invitation to meet, but he expected nothing to come from it.

Likewise, the session in Beacon was warned that Simon was "about two minutes away from taking a position at another Presbyterian church with more resources than us," recalled Dan Rigney, a Beacon resident and member of the session. It seemed unlikely he would agree to be a "bridge" pastor for them.

Simon said his views changed when he met the members of the session. Rigney said he knew something special was happening when he realized that for the first time in a while, the session was able to talk about theology and how they viewed the role of their church in the community instead of logistical challenges.

Simon, for his part, thought the session members were being too hard on themselves. Unlike other Presbyterian churches in the area, they were not only growing, but the growth was largely younger people and families. And the reason First Presbyterian

(Continued on Page 9)

(Continued from Page 8)

was growing was because it was doing something that Simon found unusual.

“The reasons so many churches are losing money and losing members is because they’ve lost the Gospel and they’ve lost relevance,” he said. “They stopped caring about the things we’re supposed to care about, and this church is pulling people in because they’re relevant.”

Part of that relevance was about the church’s early embrace of Beacon’s burgeoning artistic community after the opening in 2003 of Dia:Beacon. The church runs its own art center from its basement and its Sunday services feature a variety of local musicians. But the driving force behind the growth was its focus on residents who are struggling or marginalized, a mission that Simon believes is integral in attracting younger members focused on social justice issues.

It also attracted Simon, who forsook his plans and became the church’s interim pastor after realizing how closely his own theology matched that of the congregation.

“I do have a passionate and committed theology and it’s focused more on this world,” he said. “I’m not that interested in the next world, and I don’t think Jesus was, either.”

Like many churches, First Presbyterian hosts 12-step programs for those battling addiction. And like participants in the prayer shawl ministry at United Methodist, some 12-step attendees have started to show up on Sunday. Then there is the Welcome Table, a feeding program on Fridays and Saturdays. It has been shut down during the pandemic but, with the stability of a new pastor, the church is looking forward to restarting it.

“No questions asked,” said Rose Quirk, the member of the session in charge of the program. “I don’t care if you’re poor, I don’t care if you’re homeless, I don’t care if you’re old. I don’t care. The only thing I care about is that I have a plate and if you want that plate, you can have it.”

There’s more being offered than food. Members of the nonprofit Hudson River Housing sometimes help attendees who are struggling with finding or maintaining a home. The congregation collects coats, toiletries and other items to dispense to those who need them. But most of all, the Table offers fellowship and community to people who are, as a result of their struggles, lacking in those things.

“It allows them to socialize in a safe environment,” said Quirk. “And a lot of the people who were in there, be they elderly or low-income or homeless, their biggest problem was, nobody saw them. So many people don’t hear or see them. But we saw them.”

Beyond the doors

Rachel Thompson, a parish associate at the First Presbyterian Church of Philipstown, believes the Christian church’s problems attracting members are not new. Previously, she was a member of session at a Presbyterian church in Bedford that was celebrating its 325th anniversary. She read the session minutes from meetings in the 19th century and found them familiar.

“It was like, ‘Oh, we need to get more families and children to come, how do we do this?’”

Like Erik Simon, Thompson said she



Rachel Thompson, a parish associate at the First Presbyterian Church of Philipstown, with the Rev. Brian Merritt, its interim pastor

Photo by Ross Corsair

came to the ministry “late in life,” as she puts it, graduating from seminary in her 50s. She was active in the Presbyterian church of her youth, but a trip to the Holy Land when she was 16 with a more conservative Christian organization turned her away. “I was already questioning my faith at that point, but that trip put the nails in the coffin of my Christianity for about 20 years,” she said.

Throughout the next decades of her life, she longed to be part of a group that gathered together on a regular basis to do good, but every time she returned to church, she found that wasn’t its focus.

“It felt like they were dragging me back to the 1950s, and I wanted to run screaming to the nearest exit,” she said. But at a Presbyterian church in Dobbs Ferry, she found what she had been missing. “It turns out, what I needed was inclusivity,” she said. “I wanted a church that said, ‘Yes,’ rather than a church that draws boundaries and excludes people.”

Her return to the church, and then into the ministry, was full of revelations, she said. She had a feminist Old Testament teacher in the seminary. She learned about the Jefferson Bible: Thomas Jefferson’s adaptation of the New Testament in which all the miracles and supernatural occurrences have been removed. All of this was in sharp contrast to the conservative Christian churches she would read about in the news, with their hardline stances against evolution and homosexuality.

“Nobody I know would want to embrace that kind of theology or community,” she said. “I do think that’s been a factor in driving people away who might otherwise have been inclined. But I also think progressive theology has not been well publicized. I don’t

think people know what the alternatives are.”

So how does one let people know about the alternatives? How do you draw people into a community who are wary of what they think the church is, based on what they see in the news?

Thompson thinks it’s important to blur the line between *congregation* and *membership*, that someone can “belong” to a church without showing up for services every week.

What has attracted people to First Presbyterian Church of Philipstown, she thinks, is the works of service that the church does for the community. Many people volunteer at the church’s food pantry, which feeds about 50 families a week. Many take part in the Midnight Run, founded by Thompson’s late husband, Joe Gilmore, in which people drive food and supplies into New York City at night to distribute to the homeless.

“That was, for him, what Christianity meant, which was actually loving your neighbor,” she said. The church recently put in a pollinator garden with community help. That’s even before you get to the church’s nursery school, meditation group and book club.

Thompson said this may be the key to growing churches in the 21st century: Instead of worrying about bringing more people inside the doors of the church, the focus should be on pushing the congregation outside the doors and demonstrating their mission to the community.

“There are many people who are associated with our various communities who are not officially ‘members,’” she said. “But we are all enjoying internal spiritual work and inspiration, as well as the many different ways we find meaning and peace by helping others.”

Why This Series?

The number of people who attend or associate with Christian denominations has been falling steadily in the U.S. for decades. As a result, many churches have closed or merged or are struggling financially, including in the Highlands. The pandemic shutdown did not help, although churches quickly adapted by broadcasting services online.

Repeated social surveys have found that, as the churchgoing population ages, younger generations are not replacing them in the pews. A growing segment of the population has been labeled “nones” — they are not atheists or even agnostics. They just don’t have religion in their lives. Sundays are the second day of the weekend.

This series is examining how this trend is affecting churches in Philipstown and Beacon, and how their leaders are attempting to grow their flocks. When Beacon, Cold Spring, Nelsonville and Garrison were founded, community life centered on the churches. What changed? What should change? What must change? If it survives, what will the church of the future look like?

Your thoughts and reactions are welcome. Email me at editor@highlandscurrent.org.

Chip Rowe, Editor

The HIGHLANDS Current



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with Peggy
Scott
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Natalia Garcia, 10, of Beacon, holds one of the messages she wrote in Ukrainian to be sent to refugees. Photo by J. Simms

Letters of Hope

Beacon family organizes messages to Ukrainian refugee children

By Jeff Simms

While the mass destruction and mounting casualties caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine have dominated the news, a Beacon family is trying to spread hope through handwritten letters, from one child to another. Their message to the more than 3 million people, half of them children, who have fled Ukraine? The same words they say they would want to hear if they were in danger.

After a dinnertime conversation with their parents about what their mom called "the horror of having to leave our home and not know where to go," 10-year-old Natalia Garcia and her brother, Leo, 12, decided to write letters to Ukrainian children displaced from their homes. The idea, which the family is calling "Letters of Hope," has grown exponentially from there, with friends from Beacon and surrounding communities, and the family's former neighborhood and school in Brooklyn, joining the campaign. During the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-21, Kelly and Dan Garcia home-schooled the children. "It was an opportunity to get connected with our kids," Kelly said this week. She said both children developed an interest in history and geography, which led to "interesting conversations

(Continued on Page 11)

Odell Backs Sales-Tax Sharing Idea

Says Philipstown proposal makes sense

By Liz Schevtchuk Armstrong

Putnam County Executive MaryEllen Odell last week advocated adoption of a sales-tax sharing model conceived in Philipstown. Delivering the last State of the County address of her term-limited tenure, Odell acknowledged that villages and towns for years asked Putnam to share sales-tax revenue. The county steadfastly refused. (Sales tax goes first to New York State, which

gives some of it back to each county. Unlike Putnam, most counties return a portion of their allotment to the towns and villages in which it originated.) Now, Odell told the county Legislature in a special session in Carmel on March 10, her administration has taken another look and collaborated with Philipstown Town Board Member Jason Angell and Cold Spring Trustee Eliza Starbuck on implementing their "share the growth" concept. Instead of automatically granting villages and towns a slice of sales-tax income, the model only provides it in a year

(Continued on Page 6)

THE Challenge FOR Churches

PART FOUR



By Brian PJ Cronin

On Tuesday (March 15), just hours after the Rev. Thomas Lutz was discharged from the hospital in the wake of a minor heart attack, the police called him. A cyclist, Kenn Sapeta, had been killed on Route 9 in an accident, and the first responders knew the Philipstown resident was an active member of Our Lady of Loretto, the Catholic parish in Cold Spring where Lutz serves as the 25th pastor in its 189-year history. There was little time to rest or grieve. Instead, Lutz headed to the Sapeta home to comfort Kenn's wife, Cathy, and his children and grandchildren. By Wednesday, Lutz was planning the funeral service, as well as a fundraiser in Sapeta's memory for The Order of Malta, a Catholic lay religious order that Sapeta had been a part of that is engaged in relief work for Ukrainian refugees.

This, said Lutz, is what serving as a pastor in a small town is all about: being involved in every significant event in a person's life. You baptize babies, officiate weddings, comfort those in hospice and usher them to eternal life with a funeral Mass. "It's like being a community doctor," he said. "We're physicians of the soul." Like doctors, religious leaders had to figure out how to care for people without being in the same room during the most devastating waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our Lady of Loretto began recording and livestreaming its Sunday

services, as did many other churches. But as a Catholic church, it had to reckon with a clash between theology and technology. "In our sacramental theology, you receive Communion in person," said Lutz. "You can't do that over a computer monitor." Catholic churches compensated by offering "spiritual Communion," in which parishioners were encouraged to receive Christ in their hearts instead of partaking in the bread of life. The church also kept its doors open during the pandemic for those who wanted to pray. One man who came frequently turned out to be a COVID survivor. When he was hospitalized, stricken with the disease, doctors told him that he was going to die. But he survived, and began coming to the church as a way of thanking God, Lutz said. Others were not so fortunate. A parishioner from Our Lady of Loretto, Darrin Santos, was one of the first local residents to lose his life from the virus when he died at age 50 in April 2020. His wife, Melissa Castro-Santos, died of cancer three months later, orphaning their three teenage children. In-person services were not an option, and the church had to navigate comforting the grieving from a distance while raising money for the children. Now, with the pandemic waning — or in a lull — the church is tasked with helping a broken and battered community to heal. "We're picking up the pieces

(Continued on Page 8)

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Your thoughts and reactions are welcome. Email me at editor@highlandscurrent.org.

Chip Rowe, *Editor*

Going Digital

47% Christians who say they attended church at least once a month before the pandemic

37% Who say they currently attend at least once a month

18% Who say they attended online at least once a month before the pandemic

25% Who say they currently attend online at least once a month

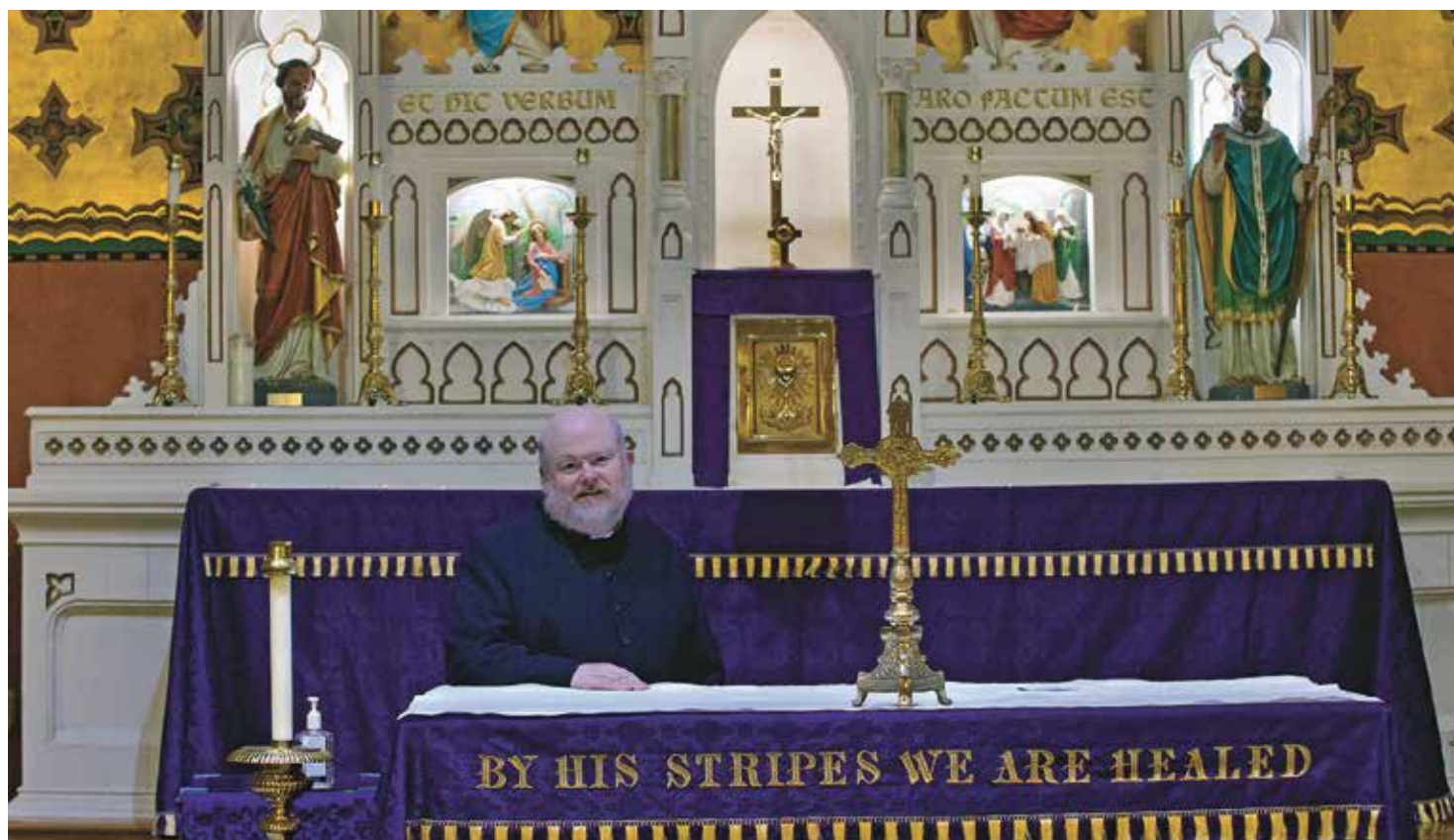
Connections

45% Americans who say being outdoors is the most spiritually fulfilling activity

42% Who say it's prayer

28% Who say it's giving to charity

Sources: “Jesus in America,” a survey of 3,119 Americans (including 2,113 Christians) conducted by Ipsos for The Episcopal Church, released March 9



The Rev. Thomas Lutz at Our Lady of Loretto in Cold Spring

Photo by Ross Corsair

Churches *(from Page 1)*

of people’s spiritual lives, emotional lives, the separation and the anxieties that everyone felt,” said Lutz. “That’s a new pastoral way in which we have to serve the community at this unique time.”

As the pandemic worsened, opportunities for public grieving and community building were few and far between. Funerals were limited to a few attendees, if they were allowed at all. Hugs could not be shared via livestream. People were and are grappling with existential questions about life, death and life after death. They don’t want to grapple with those questions in solitude and, as a result, some people are returning to the church after many years of absence, Lutz said.

“Not having that opportunity to be here, that gave them an opportunity to reflect on how meaningful it was to them,” he said. “Maybe the church was something from their childhood, or from later in life. But something was missing.”

Politics and public space

That has not been the trend for Christian churches over decades; every denomination has been losing congregants and struggled to put people in the pews, raise money, patch the walls of their aging buildings and figure out how to appeal to the spiritual and logistical needs of the community. What role does, or should, the church play during a time of polarization and pandemics? If fewer Americans define themselves as Christians — or religious at all — what does that mean for the church in general?

When we conceived this series before the pandemic, the working titles were *Are Churches Dying?* or *The Church in Crisis*. But in the process of reporting, it became clear that neither title was accurate. Churches do close. Congregations disperse. But on the whole, many churches are dealing with their challenges by changing what it means to be part of a church.

In the first three weeks of this series we looked at local churches that have closed or nearly closed, churches that split into two as a result of philosophical differences and churches that are building community by fighting for social justice. This week, to conclude the series, we look at the ways in which the pandemic has changed churches, and the opportunity it presents for religious organizations to provide solace and guidance to a nation in crisis.

“There’s a lot of grief that has not yet been expressed,” said the Rev. Brian Merritt, the interim pastor at the First Presbyterian Church of Philipstown. “How do we move forward?”

In some ways, said Merritt, the problem of declining membership is not a problem unique to churches. Elks clubs, Lions clubs, veterans’ associations and other civic and charitable organizations are all losing members. Older participants die and there are not enough younger members to succeed them.

Some of that may be a result of organizations failing to make themselves relevant to new generations, but younger people generally don’t stay in one place as they might have done decades ago. The average American moves 11 times during a lifetime, according to census data. Job markets and housing costs fluctuate. Finding steady work and housing in your hometown is no longer as common.

“The more transient our society became, the harder it was for institutions that relied on long-term memberships,” Merritt said.

That’s been to the detriment of churches, but also, he suggests, to those who forgo organized religion, thinking that their personal relationship with God will be enough.

“There’s no such thing as individual salvation,” he said. “Even if someone does have some sort of faith that they want to believe is autonomous, it was relayed through other people. And the thing that I’ve learned over time is that you are not the person that is able to see yourself the best. It’s a certain amount of hubris to

believe that you can autonomously understand spirituality without the help of other people. Even hermits on mountains live by rules that were set up by others.”

The pandemic has brought that into stark relief, as Merritt points out that isolation can exacerbate mental illness and addiction. How many people on the margins, barely holding on, were pushed over the edge when churches and other gathering places were closed, cutting them off from community?

“You need support,” he said. “You need people to believe in you.”

That includes clergy members, many of whom, when attempting to enforce the public health mandates that kept houses of worship closed during COVID waves, found themselves as a target. Merritt said some of his friends in the clergy have walked away from their calling in the past two years as a result.

“COVID became so politicized,” he said. “Now everybody’s mad. People needed a place to take some of their fear and anger and unfortunately sometimes that was clergy. They aren’t used to that. That’s a lot of stress. They’re like, ‘I used to think people liked me.’ But it’s often a no-win situation when you’re in charge of a public space.

“I’m fortunate that I’m at a church now in which there’s unanimity, but at my last church, I would get some pretty long emails from people who sounded like they had been watching a certain news program for too long.”

Live services have returned at the First Presbyterian Church of Philipstown, and Merritt is using the opportunity to begin healing wounds. At a recent service, he asked congregants to bring in photos of anyone they had lost in the pandemic and were not able to have a funeral for, even if they didn’t die from COVID.

Merritt brought in a picture of his own father, who died of dementia. “People have real pain because of this,” he said.

Nevertheless, Zoom services are, he believes, never going away. For all that it lacks in terms of personal connection, the tech-

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nology has too many advantages to ignore. Clergy members who have moved away, the sick, the disabled, or even the curious can now take part in worship in a way that they weren't able to before. Those who felt hesitant to speak out in church when making prayer requests have felt more comfortable typing requests or comments in chat. And there is the simple miracle that so many small churches that were previously lacking in technical savvy have adapted so quickly.

"Cold Spring didn't do Zoom services," Merritt said. "Now you have an 88-year-old man who runs it. That's a huge shift in culture."

That shift has been bigger in some churches than in others.

"For the last two years, I've been preaching to myself," said the Rev. Ronald Perry Sr., the pastor at Springfield Baptist Church in Beacon. "And as an old Baptist preacher, it's the weirdest thing."

An exodus

The building that houses the Springfield Baptist Church is one of the oldest in Beacon and was added to the National Register of Historic Places in recognition of it being a stop on the Underground Railroad for escaped slaves fleeing north.

The block the church stands on, Mattie Cooper Square, is named after the congregation's founder, and the rest of the street is Church Street. Its annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day Parade and service have been two of the most significant and well-attended events in Beacon for years, as well as a necessary stop for local politicians.

But despite the church's rich history, membership has fallen throughout the years. Many congregants no longer live in Beacon; some travel from as far away as Hyde Park. The city has changed rapidly in the past 10 years, said Perry, but he thinks the changes keeping people away from church are being seen statewide. New York has become too expensive, and many members have moved.

Without the older generation to bring them into the fold, attracting younger members has proven difficult. "They're not as hungry for what we call the traditional church," he said. "When they do find church, they're more attracted to churches that have entertainment, and that's been very difficult for us."

Adapting to Facebook has also been difficult, he said, because it's hard to capture the energy of a choir and a traditional Baptist service on a screen. And while the technology will get some continued use at Springfield Baptist, such as doing Bible study or small prayer meetings over Zoom during inclement weather, he said the congregation is ready to return to the pews.

When we spoke this week, the church was about to gather for its first in-person service in two years, and the excitement and relief were palpable in Perry's voice. Some members have not attended online services, preferring to wait until they can gather in person. But Perry said they shouldn't expect a return to "normal," at church or in life.

"The church that we had is no longer," he said. "We're trying to develop a new normal."

The choir will likely be replaced by a



The Rev. Bill Dandreano at Salem Tabernacle church in Beacon

Photo by Ross Corsair

few singers, he said. There will be fewer services, and they will be shorter to make them more comfortable for those wearing masks. Even so, some congregants have told him, although they are vaccinated and boosted, they're still not ready to return.

"I got folks who want to come, but they are concerned because of all the ups and downs of the pandemic," he said. "People tell me, 'I want to come but I got to really be careful.' I encourage that."

As necessary as online services have been, Perry wonders if something about the solemnity of service has been lost in the ease of access. Maybe it's not such a good thing that people can attend church without getting out of bed, or can flip it off for a while if they don't like the music, as if they were listening to the radio.

Across town, Salem Tabernacle appears to be a church that is comfortable with embracing technology. The pulpit is on a stage decked out with a full band, rock-show lighting and an enormous screen that the Rev. Bill Dandreano wryly refers

music is dope!' And I'm like, 'I'm not coming. I know what you're trying to do.'"

He decided to attend for a few weeks, but only at night, and only to support his brother. He did not tell anyone else in his family. "I didn't want to get my mom gassed up," he said.

At the first service, the pastor asked everyone who was 20 years or younger to come to the stage. Dandreano knew what was about to happen, and did not want to get up. But he knew that if he didn't, his brother or sister-in-law would tell his mother that he wasn't taking church seriously.

The pastor asked those assembled who had a calling to join the ministry and Dandreano suddenly realized in that moment that maybe — *maybe* — it was he.

"But I'm not raising my hand because again, it'll get back to my mom and she will be so excited," he recalled. "And then this dude walks up to me, turns his microphone off and goes: 'Stop worrying about what your mom's gonna think. You know it's you.'"

Five years ago, Dandreano was ordained

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- Rev. Ronald Perry Sr.

to as "The Jumbotron." But he agrees with Perry's assessment about online worship.

"It takes away from the sanctified nature of a place that's supposed to feel different from all the other places you go," he said. "You should walk in and be like, 'I'm not at a doctor's office, I'm not in a bowling alley.' It should feel different. The language should be different. The way we sing should be different. We need that. But what's happening is people are watching church on the same device they use to watch *Yellowstone* and *Euphoria*."

The turning season

No one is more surprised that Bill Dandreano became a pastor than Bill Dandreano.

Back in the late 1990s, his brother, who was in the band at the church, urged him to check it out. Dandreano was wary. The rest of his family was religious; he, less so. "He said, 'The

interpreting their mission.

"*Evangelicalism* has become a curse word," he said. "The worst of evangelicalism is: It's misogynistic and male-dominated leadership. It's judgmental, and preaches about what is wrong with you and who's not allowed here. And in America, it's got racist undertones. It's moved from being patriotic to almost nationalistic in ways that are terrifying. We shouldn't dog our country. But we worship God, not America."

Dandreano remains skeptical about the technology that his church has become adept at using. But he admits that it saved his church, as he was able to record or livestream services from the beginning. If the pandemic had happened two years earlier, before the church had gone through a technological upgrade, he's not sure what they would have done. And the large screen made the services more visually appealing to those at home.

Still, there were challenges. In April 2020, Dandreano decided to record his Good Friday sermon from his home. He set up blazingly hot stage lights in his study, hit record on his iPhone and preached for three sweaty hours. Afterward, he checked the footage and found that he had set the phone too low, cutting off his head. He had to record the three-hour service again.

"You can't get too mad though, because it's Good Friday," he said.

Not everything has been as easy to shrug off. He agrees with Brian Merritt at First Presbyterian Church of Philipstown that the past two years have taken a brutal toll on pastors. It's not helped by another aspect of the evangelical tradition that states that pastors' leadership is rooted in their ability to do things on their own.

"That kind of leadership needs to go away forever," he said. "We need to lead the church by showing that we also need help. I would want every pastor to hear me say: No matter what, you need spiritual direction or therapy right now. Because we are bearing such a heavy weight. The war, the racism, the COVID, the deaths, having your church, not having your church, having plans, losing your plans, it's so hard. It's an impossible burden to carry."

If, as Merritt says, there is no such thing as individual salvation, perhaps the pandemic's greatest lesson is that there is no such thing as individual healing, as well. If Christian churches are going to flourish during dark times in U.S. history, Dandreano believes it will be by moving from commands to invitations. It will come from making people feel welcome, giving them a place where they can relax, where they can feel comfortable opening up. For this, the art of conversation will need to come back. Not just in church, Dandreano thinks, but in the home.

"The whole Christian faith revolves around a guy giving his followers a meal on the worst night of their lives," he said. It's time, he thinks, for the church and even those who are unchurched, to hold tight to this lesson.

On Sunday (March 13), Dandreano preached about the difference between inviting people into healing versus trying to fix them.

"Trying to fix someone is not healthy," he said. "But if you just have people over to your house to eat, that event is more important than anything that will be said."