

## **Life in the Time of Covid, 2020-2022**

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I was asked to give a Stewardship talk on Sunday, September 19, 2021. The focus of the talk was St. John's Women of the ELCA during the first eighteen months of the pandemic. Here is the text of that talk, lightly edited:

As you recall, most things shut down last March 2020. For a time, all the WELCA programs and groups stopped meeting, since we couldn't come to church or gather in our homes. However, it didn't take long for us to learn about Zoom, and soon our WELCA board and small group Bible studies started up again. The Circles I'm in, the Women's Breakfast Group and the Boomers, met by Zoom, and when the weather was good during the summer of 2020, we brought our lawn chairs to a park and met outside. Women in the other Circles also mastered Zoom, and carried on as well. Now, a year later, the church is open again, and small groups are meeting in person. What a joy! I was especially moved when one of our members who had multiple surgeries after falling on the ice in January made her first non-medical outing to come to our breakfast group in June. We met in the church courtyard. The flowers were blooming, and our hearts were full, thankful to be seeing each other in person again.

In addition to the Bible study groups, WELCA sponsors service groups, including the quilters, knitters, and those who assemble the Lutheran World Relief baby-care kits, personal-care kits, and school kits. We also have a book group and monthly programs for the community. We wanted to keep these programs going one way or another.

Since I'm a quilter, I'll tell you some stories about our church basement ladies who quilt. After being closed for five months, the church opened to groups of six or less in August of 2020. A few of the quilters decided to reconvene in the basement Fellowship Hall. That was prior to the vaccines, so we were masked and worked with just one or two people at a table, rather than the usual three to five. We decided to meet weekly, rather than monthly, as we enjoyed our time together and also liked getting something done. During the winter surge in Covid, we were limited to just three people. One of the quilters developed a malignancy and had surgery and chemo during the months we met. Amazingly, she missed very few weeks, and is now in remission! We were a close-knit group as we prayed for her and she inspired us with her courage. Another regular quilter fell on the ice and broke her leg. Yes, this is another person who fell. As soon as she was able to sit at her sewing machine, she started sewing quilts at home. Other women washed and ironed the fabrics, some cut squares and sewed quilt tops, and we became a well-oiled operation, with many hands working to create each quilt. We've already sent ninety-four quilts to Lutheran World Relief and Global Health Ministries, and are well on our way to completing sixty quilts for the Community Action Center's Operation Joy at Christmas.

The congregation has been a huge support with this effort. At the Mardi Gras Drive thru event this past winter, many people donated sheets, fabrics, and even partially completed quilts. These donations have continued, like manna from heaven. Almost on a weekly basis, a new box of fabrics, sheets, or a monetary donation appears.

There are many more stories I could tell of how the women at St. John's have lived out their mission of acting boldly on their faith in Christ Jesus: the thousands of face masks that were sewn, the over 100 baby care kits that were packed, sending the TORCH boxes to college students, the community programs hosted on Zoom, the Courageous Conversation book group, the prayer shawls and baby sweaters that were knit, meaningful times of encouragement and prayer.

Please stop at the Women's Bulletin Board in the Commons to pick up a brochure and a booklet about our programming for this year (2021). The program theme is Building the Beloved Community. The next program is on October 7th when Mar Val-de-Cantos will speak on "A Tale of Two Cities and Antiracist Initiatives." For now, this program is via Zoom, so you need to pre-register. All the information for this and the other groups and projects are detailed in the booklet. We'd love to have so much interest that we need to start new small groups and circles. Men are also invited to some of the activities.

Today, between services, I hope you will join us in packing the school kits, which will be sent by Lutheran World Relief to children in developing countries. You may have heard the extraordinary story of how several cargo containers of quilts and kits miraculously survived the explosion in the Beirut harbor one year ago. It was initially thought that 47,000 quilts and kits were destroyed. However, after the dust settled, the cargo containers were found to have been protected by a concrete building.

Today is the ELCA day of service, "God's Work, Our Hands." Packing the school bags is a fun intergenerational event. Thank you to the many people who donated school supplies and money for this project. Please join us outside after communion.

In closing, I'd like to give you an image from our September (2021) *Gather* Bible study. It's a 5th century Celtic image of the Holy Spirit as a divine wild goose. Yes, a wild goose, not a white dove. I always love hearing and seeing the geese fly overhead this time of year. To quote the study guide, "There is freedom, surprise and unexpectedness to this Holy Wild Goose . . . God's Spirit is good and never stops bringing life to this world." During this time of pandemic, the Holy Wild Goose is surely at work in our midst.