

Virtual church goes viral

by Tammy Warren | Presbyterian News Service

Presbyterian congregations see God growing the church online during the pandemic



LaGrange Presbyterian Church, had talked about posting its worship services online for years, but money and volunteer support seemed to be lacking. When the COVID-19 quarantine started, the church went into action to give members, friends and anyone else who might be looking for a virtual worship service an online option.

In another church, Woodland Presbyterian Church, four years ago, the pastor of 37 years retired, leaving about 30 faithful but primarily elderly members. The church worked with the Presbytery of Middle Tennessee to create a **Training Hub** model at the church. The “hubbers”, paid part-time ministry staff in their 20s and 30s, began planning worship, children’s activities, community outreach, and special events. Just as the church started to make a profound turnaround from decline to growth with more than 40 new members in the past two years, tornadoes struck in 2019 and 2020. Those were followed by the global COVID-19 pandemic. By mid-March, Woodland had shifted to online worship on Zoom. “When we started the Zoom services, right from the beginning we had more than 50 in worship, a number of whom are parents who live in other states and love having the chance to worship with their children,” Sanders said. “Eight people attended a new member class — most, if not all of whom will be joining the congregation within the coming week. Some had attended only a few times before the pandemic forced the closure of in-person services.” Established in 1858, Woodland Presbyterian Church’s current building was completed in 1918, the same year the Spanish Flu pandemic began. Sanders heard a member of the Woodland family say recently, “It’s nice to have worship where we all look at each other instead of the back of each other’s heads!” She wonders how to continue that kind of community and connection after physical-distancing requirements are lifted and in-person services resume. Everything from how bulletins are distributed to how offering is collected to how the Communion elements are served will have to be re-thought once physical-distancing requirements ease. The **Training Hub** at Woodland has helped some young people who had been planning to attend seminary discover they probably aren’t suited for ministry, Sanders said, while others have left to attend seminary or move into other ministry positions in other places.



Three miles from Woodland, Eastminster Presbyterian Church, an English-Spanish language congregation, lost its building to two fires in 2016. Now, members of Woodland and Eastminster join together for a monthly potluck, a fall festival and a combined worship service four times a year. This blending of congregations has been energizing to both.

“We had 70 on Zoom trying to sing [for Easter],” Sanders said. “It was all kinds of glitchy. We’ve learned to roll with the punches in creating community. It’s great when a dog or a cat appears on screen. Our need to laugh is pretty strong; it’s great.” COVID-19 has changed many things. Prayer requests used to be things like, “Please pray for Johnny, he’s coming home from college.” Now, the prayer requests are more serious: “I don’t have a job anymore” or “I’m scared my mom has COVID-19.”