

People are showing up for online worship in unexpected ways

by Mike Ferguson Jim Gear, edit

LOUISVILLE - Rev. Dr. Leah Schade has noticed an unexpected phenomenon emerging from the coronavirus pandemic: The pastors she mentors and the students she teaches at Lexington Theological Seminary in Kentucky are feeling something akin to relief. "Wow!" they've told Schade, who was interviewed by the Rev. Dr. Karoline Lewis of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, Tuesday as part of the Festival of Homiletics, being held online this year. "They tell me, 'I am getting some time now to do a little more reflecting. We're doing Bible study online and conducting church business differently.'" And because their services are online, **"They find people who aren't members are listening to their sermons,"** she said. "A student told me she has to rethink her preaching because it's not just the congregation she knows." A friend from high school was viewing her service each week. **[We have noticed this here at Trinity also.]**

"This is an opportunity for evangelism. It's a way to reach people we never reached before," Schade said. "I tell them, 'Imagine someone who has never been to church before. How do you say what you are going to say to that person? That's not hypothetical anymore.' When we know others are listening to our sermons, this is an opportunity to address issues of public concern in a theological and biblical way that says, 'The church is addressing this.'"

Their response could well be, "I didn't know the church was interested in that sort of thing," Schade said. While they might still be a bit suspicious, they're grateful to see and hear about the faith community "stepping up and responding to these issues affecting communities... We are here because Jesus said to care for the least of these. This is part of our vocation. These are values we share. They are grateful and they are willing to partner with us." **The church, she said, has "found itself in the public square because of COVID-19."**

People who read the Bible "are called to take cues" from certain biblical stories of "people of faith addressing issues that will affect the common good," such as Jesus talking about taxes and Jethro telling Moses he needs help governing God's people. "We are compelled to address these issues," Schade said... "making sure values, ethics and morals have a seat at the table." A few years back, she received 1,200 responses while surveying mainline pastors about how they were using their sermons to deal with controversial issues. She gave pastors 38 topics from which to choose. Among the top 10 mentioned were poverty, racial and ethnic tensions, food insecurity, homelessness and immigration.