A 2020 Timeline

1. Jan 24-26 | Youth Ski Trip to Bryce Resort
2. Feb 14 | The First Christ Church Hokey Tonk is held in the Auditorium
3. Feb 23 | Annual Meeting
4. Feb 25 | Shrove Tuesday dinner and Mardi Gras celebration
5. Mar 8 | Ballot Sunday; four new Vestry members are elected
6. Mar 11 | In-person worship services, committee and small group meetings, are suspended following a Diocesan directive
7. Mar 15 | First digital Sunday worship service on Facebook
8. Mar 16 | Daily morning prayer at 7:30 a.m. via Facebook Live begins
9. Mar 18 | The Lazarus Financial Ministry moves its vital work to the telephone, returning calls each weekday through year end
10. Mar 19 | The Christ Church Food Pantry serves more than 45 people in its final distribution; food assistance in the City of Alexandria is centralized through ALIVE!
11. Mar 26 | First Zoom Bible Study for fourth and fifth graders
12. April | Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday are marked with Christ Church online services
13. April 5 | First Children's Chapel on Zoom
14. May 1 | Christ Church begins a grocery delivery program to Alexandria residents to supplement ALIVE!'s efforts that continues through year end
15. May 6 | Online Wednesday Evening Compline begins at 9:00 p.m.
16. May 31 | First Use of the Church Online platform for digital Sunday worship
A Note About This Issue of Rejoice

At the end of 2019, a mysterious illness began making people sick in Wuhan, China. Over the next several months, cities around the world began to shut down in an attempt to control a new virus that was spreading beyond our control. By mid-March, it was our turn to close. We all believed it would be brief, but at the time of this publication, one year later, we are still not together. There's hope on the horizon, with case numbers going down and vaccinations going up, but there's still a long way to go.

In a year that went from normal to unprecedented in a matter of months, we felt the need to capture the shared experience. Rejoice was also suspended as a printed publication for most of 2020, so this is our effort to tell the story we couldn't. The past year has shown us what we're capable of when our community is in need. Over these many pages you will see how people rallied around neighbors, families, friends, co-workers, and strangers. As the pandemic fades into the rearview, let's not lose sight of what we learned along the way.

--Meredith Bracco, Director of Communications

This has been a year like no other. As you will read in these articles, our outreach ministries all succeeded in modifying their approach and continued to serve the residents of Alexandria in a variety of ways. The need has been and will continue to be astounding. I want to thank all of our outreach leaders for persevering, for keeping their faith, and their patience as we travelled these uncharted roads together. In addition, of course all of the volunteers that make these ministries possible day in and day out. I want to give a special thank you to Jayne Osgood, Martha Wilcox, Carol Donlan and Carla Thompson for conducting interviews with the outreach leaders. In 2021, we have committed to actively learn about and make change as it pertains to race and racism within ourselves, in our actions and in the community. We are committed to live more fully into our Baptismal vows and our commitment to serve everyone with dignity and respect is the grateful response of love of God given to us in Christ Jesus.

Peace and blessings,
Melanie Gray, Director of Outreach and Mission
On the morning of March 11, 2020, I composed a letter to the parish letting you know with great sadness that we would be moving to “Communion of one kind” on Sunday, March 15, that is, we would be sharing bread only and not the common cup. I revised that letter an hour later, right before I sent it, to include the uncomfortable information that the Virginia Seminary community, including our seminary intern Lauren and Jason, our Director of Music, has possibly been exposed to the new virus. About two hours later, I sent yet another letter to let you all know that on Bishop Susan Goff’s instruction, we were canceling all worship and programming for the next two weeks out of an abundance of caution. This is how it began.

The next few months were marked by heartbreak as we canceled in-person Holy Week services, Easter, Dinner Church, Confirmation, baptisms, weddings. We found new, virtual ways of being together but as much as we wanted to believe in them, they were stiff and unfamiliar.

Meanwhile, Melanie and the outreach team were doing their own reinvention. They were listening to our community members most devastated by the lockdown: those who were already financially precarious. Our volunteers safely organized food collection and distribution, financial assistance, Christmas gifts and Thanksgiving dinner.

Later in the summer, we were hit by a new community crisis: Our nation was reckoning, again, with its fundamentally racist underpinnings, suddenly becoming exposed in every corner of our nation. We realized that, though we were physically isolated, we needed to find a way to listen to voices we had not yet heard, learn more about those we had ignored or silenced, and begin the long, difficult, painful process of confronting our own complicity in denying our brothers and sisters of color a place at our table. And, despite the limitations we had in front of us, we figured out how to begin.

We have bobbed and weaved and moved and shaked. We’ve tried new things and been excited or disappointed. We have logged on, logged off, commented “Amen,” been frozen, lost connections, made new connections, made new friends, gained new members, brought home new computers, prayed, prayed, prayed, inside, outside, online, and off. I do not know how history will look back on these days. Perhaps it will be considered a “lost year” when economics, business, education, religious life all took such hits that we will spend a generation rebuilding. Maybe it will be considered some kind of cleansing breath for our planet, as we were all sent to our rooms to think about our behavior. But I want to write this for our archives, for our own permanent record as the people of Christ Church and as people of God: We leaned in.

In a time of despair, we offered comfort through our phone calls, Zoom sessions, daily morning prayer. In a time of great need, we reinvented our financial and food ministries to serve those most deeply affected while keeping them and ourselves safe from infection. In a time of confusion, we offered stability of worship and tech support to those who wanted to join in new ways.

As church attendance shrank around the Communion, ours stayed steady each Sunday, week in and week out. As pledging numbers went down for many of our companion churches, our pledging was solid from last year to this one. We grew our hearts, we adapted our minds. We learned about ourselves and we stretched to learn about others and to confront our own shortcomings. And, my friends, God was at the center of everything we did. Through Zoom funerals, through quirky liturgical reinventions, through tech failures, through studies of systemic racism.

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Growth Admists the Retreat

By The Rev. Noelle York-Simmons, Rector
It was far from perfect. I lost my mind and my temper far more than once. I have failed repeatedly to be the child of God I was born to be and failed to be the priest I was trained to be. I know each of you have stories and feelings of failure and loss as well.

But we did it. With the help and grace of God we made it a full year under the most complicated set of circumstances imaginable. While this pandemic has celebrated its first birthday, it is far from over. We still have lots of work to do apart from each other. We still have so much patience to practice and prayers to raise. And we have work to do. We are no longer waiting for the end of the pandemic in order to do some of the forward-thinking work that we need to do together. We are finally beginning to have a new set of community conversations about the future of Fowler House. The Vestry is exploring the process of further defining Christ Church’s mission and five year plan.

God hasn’t been on vacation. Our parish hasn’t been suspended in resin for the last year, unmoving and unchanged. We have been active and living in new ways, preparing ourselves for the work ahead. It is an exciting time for Christ Church, as we write this complicated chapter of our church’s history. We still have so much wonderful work ahead of us and God has prepared us to do it.
Living Into Children’s Ministries When A Pandemic Physically Separates Us
By Ariel Rudy, Director of Children’s Ministries

Children are resilient, generally speaking. A toddler who is learning to walk might wail and shed some tears if they fall, but they will be stomping across the playground in no time after a quick dust off. Likewise, a fourth grader who loses a friendship might need time to process the loss and talk it through, but sooner or later they will chat with a new friend at lunch or make an acquaintance on the school bus. The knowledge that children are resilient, flexible, and ultimately very brave is something I have held onto during this time of isolation and social distancing. I will admit that there have been sleepless nights where I lay awake, praying that the children of our parish will still feel the love of God and of their church family while we are apart, that they will still remember the Lord’s Prayer and the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000. Those prayers have been answered so many times and in so many ways this past year as children’s ministries and our parish as a whole have shifted. The commitment to Christ that I see in our children and their families cannot be understated.

When life first ground to a halt in March of 2020 (“Just for two weeks!”) Sunday School teachers swung into action, filming story times, and sharing bedtime prayers. We expanded the Children’s Ministries Facebook page to include almost daily posts. As time wore on and we realized that such an output was unsustainable, worry crept in. We hadn’t had Sunday School or Children’s Chapel in a few weeks now, and it was looking more and more like we were in this for the long haul. Between school demands, the learning curve with technology, and the fact that so much of our curriculum is hands on, a fully online Sunday School wouldn’t be feasible. Then, a parent suggested that Children’s Chapel on Zoom might be worth a shot. Skeptical, I agreed to give it a go but secretly feared that our typical holy chaos would be less holy and more chaos.

When I closed my laptop after our first Zoom Children’s Chapel, I almost burst into tears. I hadn’t seen these wonderful children in weeks now, and yet they still knew our exact order of worship. They still listened attentively to our children’s sermon and asked questions about what comes next and how the people in the story felt. It was like a lightbulb went off: of course, we could do this online! Modern children have been using electronic devices since their little eyes could focus, and I was so impressed with their ability to pay attention to what their friends and I were saying as they muted and unmuted themselves with ease, still remembering to raise hands and take turns speaking.

Since then, we’ve had Children’s Chapel on Zoom over 40 times, including Palm Sunday and Easter—with each “regular” Sunday seeing at least 15 kids in attendance and feast days seeing double that. Fourth and fifth graders

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have crowded around iPads and smartphones to discuss different depictions of the Last Supper during Holy Week in 2020. They also examined pairs of Renaissance and modern art representing the Annunciation, Visitation, and John the Baptist in the wilderness during Advent. We’ve prayed a modified compline around campfires, played Simon Says in the glow of the flames, and studied the weekly lectionary during Bible study.

The children of our parish have demonstrated something that simply can’t be taught: a willingness to show up and wonder about God, to ask questions, to sit in the “I’m not sure about that” and then keep going. It has been a joy to spend so much time in worship and the online classroom with them this past year. I suspect that we’ve actually spent more time together than we did pre Covid-19. In a year that has taken so much away from us, the Spirit has prompted us to ask “How can we live into this?” What can we do now that we couldn’t do before, or were too afraid to try before?

Children have been more involved in worship in “the big church” than ever before, as lay readers, intercessors, and Advent wreath lighters. Children contributed drawings and writing to our daily Advent meditations as well. Grandparents, parents, friends, and children have come together digitally from miles and oceans apart to pray and discuss the themes and stories of Advent while waiting for the birth of the Christ Child. A dozen different children participated in Unto Us This Night, our Christmas Eve service for children and families. They acted out the stories, read the scripture, and played music, all for the glory of God.

Over the past year, Children’s Ministries has been able to maintain some kind of contact with over 90 percent of Christ Church families, either through mail, Zoom, or socially distanced gatherings outdoors. None of this would have been possible without the love and support of the parents and other adults of Christ Church. These are parents who get everyone up, dressed, fed, and in the car for Saturday morning Children’s Chapel in the Churchyard when it would have been far easier to stay in pajamas until noon. These are parents who roust children from the couch in front of the television to get them on Zoom for Bible Study. These are parents who share the faith at home while juggling working from home, schooling from home, fried nerves, and grouchy children. These are Sunday School teachers who handwrite Christmas notes to children, record video lessons, and pray without ceasing for our community. We had two options in March: to collapse, or to rise. And I think we rose.
We Found The Strengthening of Community Within Our Music Ensembles
By Jason Abel, Director of Music

The year 2020 began with much excitement musically. Our old organ was removed at the beginning of January as we all eagerly awaited the arrival of our new instrument in the Fall. We were able to offer a service for Candlemas in February and an expanded service of Choral Evensong on the first Sunday in March – taking advantage of the large open space in the gallery with no organ, and relying on our wonderful grand piano to help offer musical support. The Choral Evensong featured 14 string players in addition to the piano and our choir. Little did we know that would be our last “big” musical offering for the entire year. The choirs began meeting every other week by Zoom. With the younger choristers we worked on note recognition and also did some listening to pieces of music together. With our adults, we focused primarily on community building – getting to know one another a little better. In our normal rehearsal times, we don’t have much opportunity for lots of interaction with one another since it’s primarily about preparing music for the coming weeks. A small cadre of singers recorded a number of hymns for Lent and Easter which we were able to use for online worship. After the summer, we began virtual choir recording offerings for each Sunday. Members of the choir recorded their particular parts using accompaniments I sent out in advance. And then I would edit it all together for our Sunday morning online services. This was a big learning curve for all of us. As a friend of mine mentioned, I suddenly felt like I was the station manager for a small Midwestern town’s public access television channel. For some of our youth and adults who were interested, we formed a Christ Church Handbell Choir. We rehearsed outdoors wearing masks for much of the Fall. We offered music for one of our Sunday morning churchyard services and also recorded pieces to be part of the Lessons and Carols service which played on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Lots of new skills were learned during all of this, but I am most happy about the strengthening of community within our music ensembles. Across ages and skills, people got to know one another a little better. That is a precious gift I had not expected at the start of the quarantine.

While our organ delivery was delayed, we had the benefit of having the gallery floor reinforced, the ceiling and walls repaired, and new lighting installed without having to disrupt our weekly worship since it was all online or outdoors. While I miss the live music-making, I’m thankful for the willingness of so many of our dedicated musicians to offer up what we can during this pandemic. I pray that 2021 will see us engage in more familiar practices with fewer learning curves thrown in our direction. With a new organ, some additional new handbells, new faces in the choir, and a renewed joy of being together, I have no doubt that our songs of praise will soon be more powerful and meaningful than we could ever imagine.
My last sermon preached inside Christ Church began with this line: “Like all global epidemics, coronavirus is amplifying the social stratification in our world where pockets of human life and human community are under threat.” On March 7, 2020 when I said these words, I assumed that with proper medical care and attention, the “pockets” of people impacted by Covid-19 would remain small and that we would be back in church by Easter. This obviously proved to be inadequate thinking on many levels. Even in anticipating the deep and troubling social stratification that would follow in the months following, I did not imagine the impact on bodily, human life, and embodied community that would emerge. In other words, my sermon was both spot-on and totally off at the same time. And isn’t this just the story of 2020. I think also of the lengthy instruction time I would offer in the Fall of 2019 to using Zoom for Adult Formation classes. It seemed a little extravagant to get a paid Zoom account when meeting in person was basically free. Yet, it meant that when our life became mediated through the digital spaces of Zoom that we had some familiarity with what it was and how to use it. A small blessing amidst a litany of changes to how the community gathers. There is a special kind of grace, I suppose, in being right and wrong at the same time. When I was most concerned about how worship or formation or fellowship would adapt to our new digital reality I discovered that being concerned was fine but that both the Christ Church staff and people’s creativity, buoyancy, and sheer grit overran my worries and resulted in some truly profound experiences. How we worshipped, served the community, and remained connected became a daily source of inspiration, something I brought with me to my new position and community. I’m grateful for it all. I concluded that March 7 sermon with some lofty questions: “It’s time to ask: how do we want to be fully present to each other? What is our definition of a fully alive person and community?” The particular ways these questions were addressed within the Christ Church community (and continue to be) will inform us all going forward, even those of us now living elsewhere. We still live “under threat” and there remain too many “pockets” of people who bear the heaviest weight of this pandemic. This only amplifies for me the fundamental importance of our being present, our finding ways to be fully alive with one another. I don’t want to be wrong about this. In this case, I’d rather just be spot-on.
A Year in Three Words

By The Rev. Seldon M. Walker

When I was an undergrad at James Madison University, I remember having a conversation with one of my geology professors about how transient the world had become. Our conversation branched from a reflection on our weekends. My professor and her husband had just traveled to a neighboring state to see some friends and upon arriving back home, her husband had come down with an illness. To this day I remember my professor saying something along the lines of, “We don’t know where he picked it up because we were in contact with so many people…that’s the problem with the way the world has become. It’s both a blessing and a curse that you can in less than one day’s time, fly across the country, have a meeting for work, and then make it back home just in-time for bed.” Little did she know that she would be predicting what our future would hold some 14 years later: the coming of a silent assassin, who knows no borders, no boundaries, and who jumps from person to person without regard for the destruction that it leaves behind. Bishop Budde of the Diocese of Washington, who, some two weeks into the assault from this silent assassin, that said “We will never see with these eyes again.” And while that statement was meant to provide for a means of hope and encouragement, I can’t help but wonder if upon looking back over the course of this year, Bishop Budde would choose to use those same words again. Presumably, she, like so many others, never thought that when the news broke of the virus breaching the borders of the United States, that we’d be in this thing for nearly a year. A few weeks, certainly. A few months, probably. Six months, unlikely. A year…never. And yet, here we are, and we are still seeing with these same eyes.

And because of that, I have to say, “Thank you.” Thank you for sticking with us. Thank you for being patient when Noelle and Lyndon and myself were trying to figure out how to “do” online worship (if I may speak for all of us now, I would venture to say that we are still trying to figure it out, it’s just not how worship is supposed to be). Thank you for continuing to support Christ Church and its ministry. Thank you for doing your best to say goodbye to two clergy without hugs and handshakes and celebrations. Thank you for being you. It is hard to put into words all of the feelings, attitudes, thoughts, that have happened throughout the course of this year. I only wish now that I had been keeping a record or a journal, but that’s just not who I am. And so, if I had to choose three words to best summarize these 331+ days thus far, I think they would be: frustrating, grateful, and perseverance. Frustrating. Online worship is extremely frustrating. It is frustrating for clergy, for A/V technicians, for church musicians, for choirs, for lay readers, for worshipers. No matter how many steps, stopgaps, backup plans one puts in place to try and pull it off without issue, there is always that chance that something will go wrong. To be perfectly candid, I’m tired of it. Tired of holding my breath before the start of each service, whether livestreamed or prerecorded. Tired of wondering what you, the parishioners and worshipers, are seeing or hearing (or not seeing or hearing in many cases) on the other end. Tired of feeling like a movie producer and actor instead of a worship leader. And while there are some positives to come out of being online, it has been a sometimes gruesome and expensive battle to try and equip our church buildings (and or our homes!) to make them do something that they were never built to do.

Grateful. I’m grateful that I’ve been able to keep doing what I love to do. I’m grateful that I’ve been relatively healthy throughout these 331 days. I’m grateful that I’ve had the opportunity to have more quality time with my family. And most importantly, I’m grateful for all of the support that our churches have continued to receive from our parishioners. That support is a testament to love that you have for God and the will that you have to continue doing the hard work of Kingdom building, even when the walls are crumbling around you and the silent assassin is taking siege. That’s powerful stuff. That’s the Jesus movement at its best. Keep it up. Perseverance. We must persevere, and we will persevere. Though trying it may be, and though sadness continues to infect our hearts on a daily basis, we will make it through. And we will make it through because in the eloquent words of Inaugural Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman, we are a people who are brave enough not just to see the light, but to be the light. For while we may still be seeing with these same eyes, that does not mean that we are incapable of doing something with our lives right here and right now, that will change the viewpoint of someone else so that they can be brave enough to be the light as well.
As older parishioners, my husband and I have had to learn to hunker down, only going out for doctor’s appointments and to pick up dinner, and appreciate the blessings that are around us every day. Our beautiful ever-changing river view, the kindness of our neighbors who do our shopping and our love of reading to keep us occupied. We have watched the wonderful ways our Christ Church community has come together, to worship, to connect through Zoom groups, and tirelessly give to our community in need. A special benefit for me was studying the Sacred Ground curriculum, and continuing our discussion of racial injustice with my fellow Moorings group members. We have also been fortunate to add some Black Lives Matter activists from Franklin County, Virginia, whom we reached out to after reading of their courage and commitment in a Washington Post article. They inspire us every time we meet. --Allyn Trautman

“All this was a long time ago, I remember, And I would do it again, but set down This set down This: were we led all that way for Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death, But had thought they were different; this Birth was Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.” Excerpt from T.S. Eliot’s Journey of the Magi “A hard time we had of it”

In a way, 2020 may be the year for which this poem was written. If we are honest, not many of us perhaps have felt the visceral connection between a birth and a death as roundly as now, even if academically we could spin out a few hundred words analyzing the poem’s erudition. Sanitized and silver-lining-loving, we have been able to ensure the two firmly inhabit their allotted separate spaces. And yet, here we are, in a year where every loss is somehow eerily accompanied by a gain of some sort, however inadequate; and every gain is haunted by the sheer loss that surrounds us and narrates our days. Hardship, weakness, absence, negation, shortage: these are the negatives that the prosperity and construct of our lives has enabled us to soften, eliminate, relegate and eradicate, moving these experiences into distinct, controlled, ritualized environments of healthcare and religion. For death to break into life and be present even as we birth new knowledge of ourselves, our relationships and our reserves of good, is a shock. One we have noticed and are still processing. This poem is discovered anew by those of us who have had the privilege of compartmentalizing birth and death all these years. This poem’s death-in-birth and birth-in-death power, though, resonates the lived experience of millions in the present - whether in Gaza, in Yemen, in Afghanistan, in South Sudan, in Alexandria... indeed in food banks, clinics, streets and homes nearer to us than we know. If the death of the year, and the deaths of the year, have given birth in us to a new understanding, a new ability to live in the tension of this reality that the poet had the Magi grasp, may we commit ourselves to serving those around us and further afield who have not had to wait until this beast of a year to know the brutal reality. May we be “no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation”. --Claire Haymes
2020 reminded me of a poem (a litany in the time of plague) by Thomas Nashe, written in the summer of 1592 after an outbreak of plague in London. Here is the poem:

Adieu, farewell, earth's bliss;  Dust hath closed Helen's eye.
This world uncertain is;  I am sick, I must die.
Fond are life's lustful joys;  Lord, have mercy on us!
Death proves them all but toys;  Strength stoops unto the grave,
None from his darts can fly;  Worms feed on Hector brave;
I am sick, I must die.  Swords may not fight with fate,
Lord, have mercy on us!  Earth still holds open her gate.

Rich men, trust not in wealth,  "Come, come!" the bells do cry.
Gold cannot buy you health;  I am sick, I must die.
Physic himself must fade.  Lord, have mercy on us!
All things to end are made,  Wit with his wantonness
The plague full swift goes by;  Tasteth death's bitterness;
I am sick, I must die.  Hell's executioner
Lord, have mercy on us!  Hath no ears for to hear

Beauty is but a flower  What vain art can reply.
Which wrinkles will devour;  I am sick, I must die.
Brightness falls from the air;  Lord, have mercy on us!
Queens have died young and fair;

Haste, therefore, each degree,
To welcome destiny;
Heaven is our heritage,
Earth but a player's stage;
Mount we unto the sky.
I am sick, I must die.
Lord, have mercy on us!

Blessings for a new year - John Luch

2020 looked like retirement on steroids. The fact that we are retired made this easier for us. We were always thinking about those who were still working but could no longer. Many losing opportunities with their careers, money. The college kids totally missing out on their adventures. How does one even date? I know this is harder for young people. I wonder how I would cope at say 25 or 30! For us, Zoom and FaceTime became lifelines to friends and cultural events. I learned different things that I would not have otherwise, like how to design a cheeseboard for the day I actually can use one!

What we found though is we enjoyed the ease of visiting with people the ole fashioned way. The way our parents did. A friend drops in, sits in the back yard and we talk and laugh, and just drink in each other's company. So satisfying when you feel like you are in a friend desert.

And you know, we didn't miss the anxiety that comes with hosting people more formally, the preparations etc.; we could just share a few moments with such little effort. We came to love it so much! The casualness was a given. You could even visit in pajamas outside in the yard, as long as you had your mask on! I know we have all gotten to know our homes in a more intimate way and that's a good thing too. In this we came to feel the comfort and privilege we have been given and giving thanks for it each day. And continued compassion for all of us. Missing you all. --Susan Davis
I was inoculated for the pandemic in February 2020.
How could that have been?
I was fortunate to have been included on a dental mission to Uganda. We were primarily serving a home and school for abandoned children called Amahoro (meaning “peace”).
When we first arrived, we were swarmed by the most beautiful children. All they wanted was to connect with us through physical touch. At one point I was holding hands with six! Their warmth was almost overwhelming.
I wondered who was there to serve whom! Memories of that moment and others subsequent have buoyed me through the tumultuous months since. God will provide.
God did provide. God is good. Bless those children! Let me just add that one of those children (saluting in the photo) had a drooping eyelid that covered over half of one eye. I was able, through our friends at Mengo Hospital, to connect him with an eye doctor who shortly thereafter operated to raise that lid. That beautiful boy now has the use of both eyes. Thanks be to God through Mengo! -- Tom Suydam

As I prepare to turn 40 later this month following a truly unprecedented year of events not experienced in my lifetime—from the global pandemic that has irrevocably changed our world to a resurgence in racial divisions in our country to an election that has been disputed and divided our country to the dehumanization of those who do not believe exactly as we do—I feel compelled to devote this year’s Christmas letter to some profound lessons Covid-19 has taught me this year about myself, faith, life and love.
As tempting as it may be to succumb to the dire news cycle and mounting Covid-19 cases and deaths occurring, not just in our country, but around the globe. I have found a daily dose of nature to be truly good for the soul.

John Muir:
“In every walk in nature one receives far more than he seeks.”
“Into the mountains I go to lose myself and find my soul.”
"Keep close to Nature's heart... and break clear away, once in awhile, and climb a mountain or spend a week in the woods. Wash your spirit clean.”

This past year has renewed in me a love of solitude in the wilderness...a hunger to be in the light to remind myself that God is ever present—even in these very dark times. There is a restorative power, a healing of the soul that occurs when I go on a walk in nature, a habit I have embraced this year, and it is quite noticeable when I go too long without feeding this vital body-spirit-earth connection. It is a human need to feel cherished, desired, valued, loved and companioned on this earth.

Be open to those whom God places along your path for they are there to teach you valuable lessons about yourself and the power of the human connection. Over the course of this year, even before the pandemic hit us, I was processing and grieving the loss of my marriage. As I entered an unknown and new life chapter, there have been moments of loneliness. Yet love in the time of Covid-19 is real. As I opened up my heart and made myself vulnerable to others—God met my needs for companionship and love.

In fact, throughout this year, I have felt love flowing toward me from many directions: from the Lord, from my dear and beloved parents, and from friends near and far, old and new. I have felt a deep sense of gratitude for being alive and being human, being cared for and cherished as a precious child of God. I have felt the power of
human connection, and a sense of renewal and life, of rediscovery of myself. Of the full range of emotions that comes from loving others and, in the words of my beloved poet, Kahlil Gibran, I have known “the pain of too much tenderness.”

Is it risky? Of course it is. But I would rather approach life with an open heart, replete with the range of human emotions, than a closed one. Embrace your humanity and know that you will make mistakes along the way. Be kind and gentle with yourself when you do and know that God’s love is without boundaries and conditions. This knowledge, coupled with God’s grace, has helped me weather this challenging year of uncertainty and transition. Learn to forgive yourself and others. Always keep your heart open to reconciliation with those who have hurt you. God presented me with unexpected moments for healing and compassion this year—moments to be a source of light in someone’s life. The ministry of presence, a beautiful concept I learned whilst working with chaplains, is a very real thing. These can seem like dark times. Never lose sight of the divine light that shines in you and in others. Strive to be a source of light, love and compassion in dark places.

You are the company you keep—surround yourself with a sisterhood of strong women to inspire you and lift you up—with friends who are truth-tellers of difficult truths. Raw honesty is often needed to bring you back to reality. Embrace the soulmates that come into your life. Yes—soulmates plural—they can come into your life in many forms to ignite a fire within you and help you grow. Sometimes you need to set someone free so they can be their best self and become who they were meant to be—so they can embrace their passions and reclaim what makes them a unique and singular human being on this earth.

This act of letting go can bring with it a sense of tremendous personal growth and renewed friendship. And don’t apologize for self-care and embracing authenticity.

In the words of the great Maya Angelou on belonging:
“You are only free when you realize you belong no place. You belong every place, no place at all. The price is high, the reward is great.”

May we have the courage to remain genuine and true to who we are and worry less about fitting in. It takes courage to step out into the unknown and this year God has shown me what it is to be courageous and that I am stronger than I realized. This strength and courage is on full display every day with our healthcare workers on the frontlines of this pandemic and in the personal sacrifices they make in pursuit of this higher calling. This strength and courage is found in the voices that have peacefully rallied against social and racial injustice and against narratives of dehumanization of the “other.” There are no illegal aliens in the eyes of God. Don’t succumb to pessimism and fear—there is cause for hope.

Another verse that continued to surface in my heart at various points this year comes from Jeremiah 29:11:
“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, ‘Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”

I close with these parting thoughts from one of my favorite benedictions at church:
“Life is short. And we have too little time to gladden the hearts of those who walk the way with us so be quick to be kind. Make haste to love. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, be with you now and forevermore. Amen.”

Here’s to new beginnings and thanks for walking the way with me. --Christianne Marie Fauntleroy Witten
Since the Lazarus Food Pantry first opened, it has evolved in many ways to meet the changing needs of our neighbors. In 2020, we saw, perhaps, our biggest challenge—how to continue to provide food and other essential household items to those in need, while maintaining the safety of our guests and volunteers in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In early March, it became clear that our usual pantry, where guests walked through the Meade Room on Thursday mornings selecting the items they needed, was no longer viable. We made the difficult decision to close our doors and refer guests instead to weekly ALIVE! food distributions and other pantries in the community. We did not know what would happen next, or when we would reopen.

Eventually the Lazarus Emergency Financial Ministry, which remained open throughout the pandemic, noticed more and more clients experiencing food insecurity. Many guests had large families to feed and what they were able to get from other pantries simply was not enough to last them the week. Other guests could not make it to food pantries or drive-up food giveaways at all, because either they had no transportation or they were single parents and the prospect of visiting a pantry, or leaving home at all as Covid-19 cases surged, felt impossible.

The Lazarus Food Pantry set out to evolve once more to fill this gap. We began making contact-free deliveries of groceries and gift cards on May 1. Since that time, volunteers have made more than 570 deliveries, serving nearly 1200 individuals. In eight months, we have spent nearly $23,000 on grocery gift cards, food, and household essentials like dish soap and toilet paper. We are grateful for the generous individual donations as well as grant funding from ACT for Alexandria, which has made our efforts possible.

We are also thankful for our church partners who have contributed to this work. It has been an ecumenical endeavor. We have received donations from ALIVE!, Fairlington United Methodist Church, Christ Church, Lazarus pantry volunteers, and many other groups. We received 5,000 pounds of food in December from the Jesus Christ Latter Day Saint’s Church driven to us from Salt Lake City. Volunteers have come from Trinity United Methodist Church, ALIVE!, and Christ Church, to name just a few.

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More than 1,000 Alexandrians from All Walks Of Life Assisted with Emergency Rent Relief by the Lazarus Emergency Financial Ministry in 2020

By Martha Wilcox, special to Rejoice

“S omething people think the Lazarus Ministry is a handout of funds for the poor,” said Julie Duke, long-time Lazarus Counselor. “It is really so much more. It is a sincere caring for people who find themselves in a bad place at a particular time.”

Sadly, many people in our community found themselves in a bad place during 2020: Uber drivers, restaurant workers, moms who got sick, dads who had to quit jobs to stay home to watch the kids. Pandemic-related job loss and need of childcare thrust many Alexandrians into a financial crisis, joining others who regularly live on the edge.

At the same time, Christ Church Outreach Ministries had to rethink and restructure what was previously an in-person ministry and respond to growing needs. Innovative solutions led to three major shifts in the program. The first initiative, pro-active outreach, mobilized volunteers to call on past Lazarus Ministry clients to check on their wellbeing during the early days of the pandemic. The calls continue today, with help provided as needed to those who are struggling to get food, pay rent, fill prescriptions, get to appointments, or manage having Covid-19.

The second initiative, community collaboration, was already in the works before 2020, but it took on new urgency and scope to respond to evolving challenges. Melanie Gray, a long-time integrating force in the community, helped take collaboration to a higher level, bringing together civic leaders, religious groups, community organizations, law enforcement, housing authorities and others. In 2020, the group met regularly and expanded exponentially to strategize how to best serve those in need.

The Lazarus Financial Ministry is an integral part of the web of support. The ministry helps with emergency financial assistance, most often assisting with rent and utilities. Ann McMurray, a 15-year counselor explains, “We do not provide rental assistance to individuals on a regular basis. We often call ourselves a “band aid” ministry, here to help in emergencies and special situations. We are not intended to be part of a person's budget, so when we do find someone is coming frequently, we try and help them figure out things like are they getting all the benefits they are eligible for, are there ways to cut back, do they need to look for a cheaper place to live, are they using our food pantry to help curb expenses. Often no one has had these conversations with them and this is done in a way that is not paternal but supportive.”

Julie adds, “The ministry offers more than just financial assistance, we tend the human being. For instance, we ask how they are doing with food and medications. Then we can connect them with other community resources as needed. We have a much bigger impact because our whole community is invested in working together.”

The third initiative, remote counseling was a necessary change due to the pandemic. The in-person ministry was transformed into a phone connection. Clients were directed to leave a message on a central line. Counselors signed up for shifts to field the calls on their personal cell phones Monday – Friday 9am to 6 pm. Then the clients contact volunteers directly when they needed something down the road, further strengthening the trusting relationship.

A Transforming Ministry

In 2020 Christ Church Lazarus Ministry counselors has helped 1,389 individuals with $374,476.41 in support, 99% was spent on rent to prevent evictions. This is a 39 percent increase in spending as compared to 2019. That is an average of $269.60 per check. What is important to understand is that with the moratorium in place it still meant tenants had to be paying something toward their monthly rent and they had to sign the declaration. Therefore, educating our clients about their rights has been a huge part of our efforts.

Of these donations, $151,359.89 (41 percent) came from individuals donors; $101,420 (28 percent) were grants; and $113,346.80 (31 percent) were donations from other churches and organizations like ALIVE!. Conversations the counselors have with the clients are not just transactional, they are relational. They are trained to not start with the need (“So you are behind on your rent?”) but with caring, (“Tell me what's going on?” or “How are you?”) Julie explains, “They want so badly just to talk to someone, and they are always so pleased when we call and then follow up later to see how things are going.”

Julie tells the story of one woman who was moving out of state to take care of an ailing mother but needed to clear up rent and utility debt first. It took several months of working together, but she was finally able to make the move. Julie still calls her from time to time. “Even though she doesn't live here anymore, we keep in touch.” While she misses the in-person connection, Julie said the remote ministry has some benefits to the clients. Because the conversations continued on page 16
Early on, we stored donations in my living room, until they began to outgrow the space and my three-year-old (a pantry veteran who used to attend with me weekly) began continually running off with boxes of cereal. When this became untenable, Trinity UMC offered us the use of their facility to store the food. It has been a beautiful sight, to watch God’s people work together to support and care for one another through this ministry. The guests we serve today are, for the most part, not the same people we saw each week on Thursday mornings. Many are new to Lazarus and have never needed assistance before. A large proportion of our clients these days (more than 50 percent) are Spanish-speaking families living in the Chirilagua neighborhood, an area particularly hard hit by the pandemic. While fresh produce, meat and dairy products remain sought-after requests, household items and cleaning supplies are in high demand as well, and parents are requesting snacks and easy lunches for their kids who are doing school from home. We have done our best to adjust our offerings accordingly, to better serve our changing population and its varying needs.

I look forward to the day that we will be able to return to an in-person food pantry. I miss standing at the door and greeting the guests, sharing prayer requests and stories about our children as they waited for their turn to shop. I hope that when we do return, our new guests, volunteers, and community partners will join us there too.

For now, however, I am content to know that we are serving our neighbors in the best way that we can and that whatever comes next, we will meet the challenge and adapt, as we always have.

Ann tells of a lovely older woman whose story was inspirational. Her son was recently killed from gun violence in California. She wanted to go, and her daughter was helping with airfare, but she needed some assistance with rent. She was taking care of three grandchildren because their mom was in rehab, and when she returned from California, she had two more grandchildren. Ann adds, “She was an amazingly strong woman and so grateful for whatever we could do. Such a pleasure to talk with. I can’t imagine what she’s been through and just admired her a great deal.”

Working as a counselor during this year has been both a challenge and a joy. Ann explains, “The Lazarus Ministry is very grounding, and I have to say, I do see God in the faces of the people I meet. I sure miss seeing their faces.”
Teamwork and Generosity Make Lazarus Emergency Financial Assistance to our Spanish Speaking Guests Successful

By Carol Donlan, Special to Rejoice

Since March, of the calls that come, more than 1,000 have come to the Lazarus Ministry’s Spanish-Speaking Community hotline. People need money for rent, utilities, food, cleaning supplies, medicine – and more, explains Paul Doherty. Of the CARES Act grant funds we received $42,575 was used to target families living in Arlandria who were behind on their rent and facing eviction. This neighborhood has faced a 52 percent positive testing rate for Covid-19, many already live in overcrowded conditions and some live in fear because of their immigration status.

“They call us because we answer the phone,” he says. “The counselors call back.” The word spreads and more calls come.

Paul, who served in Mexico and Uruguay for the State Department, says he can communicate quite well in Spanish. But he calls himself “just an assistant” to two native Spanish speakers, Counselors Astrid Garcia and Jonathan Amaya. They are college students who themselves have been members of Christ Church’s Kids of Note Program since middle school. Now it has come full circle and Astrid and Jonathan are helping others through Christ Church while also being full time college students.

“Many of our guests live in Arlandria,” Paul says. “It’s eye-opening to see what the need is in this community. One of our counselors’ questions is ‘How much food do you have right now?’ Many go to food banks, but you can’t go every day. Some say, ‘I have enough food, but I need Clorox, paper towels, toilet paper, dish soap.’

“We ask, ‘Are you taking any medication? Do you have enough?’ We ask parents if they need diapers, what size?’

Sometimes what is needed is more complicated.

A young single mother with a four year old called. She suffers from serious health issues and abuse and hasn’t been able to work. Can someone help? “Melanie [Gray] arranged to have her back rent paid,” Paul says, “Astrid delivered food and clothing and other household items. Melanie arranged through her contacts for much-needed furniture to be delivered and even sent a Christmas tree.”

“The people I volunteer with are such good souls, doing God’s work,” Paul says. “I’m very proud to be a member of the group. I help in a small way. I mostly get to call people and tell them good news. I told one man we were delivering a check for $250 to his landlord, and he cried for the rest of the conversation. He couldn’t compose himself.”

“They don’t belong to our church. They don’t know me. And they are so grateful. They end most of our conversations with ‘May God Bless You.’”

Gifts from knitters for Lazarus guests
Lazarus Ministry Steps in to Help Alexandria City Employees Needing Assistance During Covid-19
By Carol Donlan

I would like to send a huge thank you to each of you for the assistance you provided me. I received a (grocery) gift card yesterday and I received an email that my bill had been paid. This is a big help to myself and my daughter who was laid off. … To God Be The Glory!

By the end of 2020, the Lazarus City Employee Emergency Assistance will have helped more than 250 City of Alexandria employees with $130,000 in financial assistance – much of it as grocery gift cards or assistance with rent, utilities and other bills. The pandemic cut the hours and/or second jobs for many City of Alexandria employees – both lower paid full time, part-time and contract employees. While still employed, family members had lost jobs, needed to stay home with children or got Covid-19 themselves. Many were going hungry or having to put off paying rent and utilities, car payments and childcare. Eighty five percent of City employees do not live in the City of Alexandria, often because it is too expensive.

A group of Alexandria residents saw these workers in need and began donating to a local nonprofit, ACT for Alexandria, that had worked with Melanie Gray and the Lazarus Financial Ministry in the past. ACT called together the Assistant City Manager, the Fire and Police Chiefs, the heads of the Department of Community and Human Services and the Recreation Department, local donors and Christ Church parishioner Rawles Jones met with Melanie Gray on April 30 and explored how City employees could be assisted. A focus group was held with employees to hear from them what was going on in their lives and how they thought this might work. Employees unanimously wanted to receive help anonymously and they wanted to help as many people possible, even if that meant giving less dollars per person. A generous anonymous donation from a community member was given to start the fund, a fundraising campaign was launched by ACT and after deliberating with the Lazarus Counselors it was agreed that the Christ Church Lazarus Ministry would accept the challenge of being the recipient and disseminator of these funds. The Lazarus City Employee Emergency Assistance program officially opened on June 8 and we wrapped up the third round of assistance on November 20. Anne Richardson, a Christ Church member, outreach leader and volunteer and Christ Church Director of Development, and Liz Denson, assistant to Outreach and Mission, agreed to oversee the volunteers and the administration of the funds. ACT, the City, and Lazarus Ministry developed criteria for applicants, for example, applicants had to earn $60,000 or less. They set up a separate phone extension, application process, arranged for trained Lazarus counselors to conduct intakes and make recommendations. Counselors picked up calls Monday through Friday. They also provided case management, advocacy and emotional support. Counselors saw some common threads in the applications. For instance, Anne said, many people who work for Parks and Recreation work full time only in summer, when children’s programs are in full swing. Last summer, there was no full time work for them. Just over 30 percent work for Social Services in entry level positions. Meanwhile many part-time and lower-paid city employees have second jobs in catering, or as Uber drivers or in other service work. The pandemic cut those jobs, too. Liz got the gift cards, wrote checks, and handled the logistics. As word got out, higher-paid City workers asked to donate to the program. A portal was set up so City employees could make a one time donation or donate directly from their paychecks on an ongoing basis.

There has been so much gratitude for this program. Many recipients were overwhelmed that someone in the city would think of helping them. Many planned to repay the money when they get back on their feet.

I just want to say thank you for the assistance. Watching my kids in bed knowing their stomachs are full feels good! From the bottom of my heart, I really appreciate it!
Bag Lunch Ministry During Covid-19
By Andrea McNicholas, Bag Lunch Ministry Coordinator

On a rotational basis of every five weeks or so, Christ Church parishioners make and distribute free lunches at Meade Memorial Church for the Bag Lunch Ministry that has been ongoing for at least 30 years.

With the onset of Covid-19, the free lunch program has been able to continue with significant changes. Pre-Covid-19, a group of parishioners would gather in the Auditorium kitchen to make sandwiches, prepare soup and the like for 30-50 people. Other volunteers would deliver the lunches to Meade Memorial where the lunches would be distributed.

Since March 2020, individuals or families sign up to shop for the groceries, prepare the lunches in their homes and then deliver and distribute the meals at Christ Church.

There have been gains and losses for this program adjustment. There was a lovely group of women who came together in the church kitchen and that camaraderie and fellowship of making these lunches is gone. Many of these volunteers had been making lunches for decades. On the other hand, we have gained a nice new crop of volunteers who do most of the work from their homes.

The lunch guests at Meade have also had to accept major changes to the program. Before they would gather in Meade's fellowship hall, sitting on long tables and enjoying a leisurely lunch. During lunch time, 11:30 a.m. at Meade was a place to come and where they would know people and where they were known. And it was a time to get out of the weather and rest awhile.

This is no longer the case. Those wanting lunch line up along the sidewalk in whatever the weather, grab a lunch, and go on their way. A little community oasis has been lost for the time being.

As I have had to explain the ministry to each new volunteer – it has made me reflect more about what we have been doing and why. Why have mostly older white volunteers make lunch for mostly older black men day after day, year after year, decade after decade? Why are we so comfortable with this status quo as if this is just the way it is and always will be? What are the social dynamics that keep white elderly financially comfortable enough to be able to volunteer their time while the elderly black men need free meals? What would need to happen so that the lunch program no longer needed to exist? I am not sure – but I know shaking off my complacency is a beginning.

Our Outreach Committee is committed to exploring our complacency in 2021.
Ladrey Bingo has long been a mainstay at Alexandria's Senior High-rise apartments on Wythe Street. On the third Thursday of every month, from 6:30 – 8:00 p.m., residents look forward to a night of fellowship and fun as they play Bingo and socialize with their neighbors. Snacks are served, prizes are won and laughter abounds. The evening's events are free for everyone and have become one of Ladrey's most popular recurring events for all residents. For the past 15 years, Trish Fineran & Nick Wasilewski have led this joyful ministry: they provide the refreshments, purchase prizes from the Capital Area Foodbank in Lorton, and collect items donated from friends, volunteers, church members, the Christ Church Gift Shop, Christ Child Project and Outreach Committee. In addition, they work with volunteers to set up, monitor, and restock the player and prize tables, call numbers, run the raffle, and mentor volunteers to assist residents with mobility, hearing, and language restrictions.

It is an inclusive, fast-paced, fun-filled evening with thoughtful preparation and delivery and a grateful community.

Over the years, Trish & Nick have met their players’ families, made hospital visits, attended funerals, celebrated birthdays, holidays, and special events. “As we get to know the residents we serve and the volunteers we work with, we care about them and they care about us and the community becomes richer for it,” Trish said. Then came Covid-19 and everything stopped. “This just wasn’t something we could do online,” Trish said. “It’s become a monthly gathering of friends and a time of fellowship.”

Faced with an ongoing quarantine for an at-risk population, Trish & Nick found themselves not only missing the residents but their key volunteer team members: Steve Hines, a resident, custodian and Ladrey board member, who helps with logistics every month, as well as Peter Greve, a long-term volunteer who is now a senior at Bishop Ireton High School, as well as Christ Church's Jane Baird, Melanie Gray, and Liz Denson. As fall came, and pandemic restrictions continued, everyone realized that the Ladrey seniors would miss the Annual Holiday Bingo. “It’s a big deal for them,” Nick said. “Not only is the event colorful, lively and super fun, but for the last three years, The Bediz Group, who are Realtors with the Keller Williams Capital Properties, had provided gift bags of favorite toiletries for every attendee. Melanie asked our benefactor if they could do more this year, and they did! This year the Bediz Group provided Christmas gift bags for each of the 187 residents that included hats, scarves, gloves, lotion, and more. Christ Church purchased grocery gift cards and fleece blankets for each resident. Recognizing that 2021 will likely continue to keep us apart from one another we hope to come up with creative ways to interact with the residents of Ladrey this year.
Carpenter’s Shelter Friday Night Meals in the Time of Covid-19
By Barbara Boehm and Carla Thompson, Carpenter’s Shelter Ministry Coordinators

Christ Church volunteers have prepared and served dinner twice monthly to the residents of Carpenter’s Shelter for decades. When renovation construction began two years ago, the shelter moved its operations temporarily to Landmark Mall. Christ Church followed, continuing to provide dinners but adjusting menus and prep to accommodate the less-equipped kitchen at the temporary site.

When Covid-19 hit last spring, the shelter restricted access to staff and residents only, and the Christ Church team had to rethink how to continue to serve the Carpenter’s Shelter community. We found partners in two local restaurants, Lori’s Table on Old Town and Zoup of Ballston, who provided discounted delicious dinners. Volunteers helped donate funds for the catered dinners and transported the meals to the shelter for the staff to serve.

Later in the summer, when the shelter allowed volunteers to return to the kitchen, with Covid-19 prevention protocols in place, Christ Church volunteers readily returned - delivering groceries and cooking and serving dinners on-site. The residents were happy to see us back behind the counter, and we were thrilled to be there. The shelter has now moved back to its Henry Street location, into its beautiful new building with its shiny new kitchen. Because of Covid-19, we can no longer mingle among the residents offering dessert after dinner, and we must stay behind the kitchen counter and sneeze guards, while wearing masks all the time. However, we are so thankful and happy to be sharing dinner with our friends again at the shelter.

The tragic pandemic has brought so many challenges to everyone: health challenges, financial challenges, emotional challenges – there were times when we did not know how we would be able to continue providing the Friday night meals. Would people be able to continue to donate groceries? Would anyone be able to work in the kitchen to prepare and serve? Could we afford the restaurant dinners? The answer to all was yes! Thanks to our loyal volunteers, we have been able to pivot each time the shelter has had to change its procedures. Every time we received an email – yes, I can drop off the rotisserie chickens; yes, I can help cook on Friday night; yes, I can pick up the lasagna from Lori’s Table and deliver it to Landmark – our faith in God and our faith in each other was reaffirmed.

Rites of Passage 2020

Deaths

Mary Ludgate
John William Griffin, Jr.
Tomi Harman
Kate Felton
John Jaskot
Margarita Sifuentes
Bill Kruse
Pete Holt
Ruth Carpenter
Madison Stone
Marcia Rushford
Z Bernard Lloyd III
Richard Hall
John Todd Kerwin
Beverly Ramsey
John Lindeman
David Goehler
Daniel DeHart
Ahmaud Arbery
Bill Mattison
Bob Pritchard
Charlotte Shelton
Indah Adenan
Ronald Miller
George Taylor
Gloris Rudy
Dick McCann
Gloris Rudy
Brittany Underwood
Phil Freidlander
Mary Robinson
Yost Connor
Samantha Fleming
Rosalie Cooper
Eleanor Mullen
John C. Boehm, Sr.
Wanda Banks
Brent A. Braun
Joel Kiger
Katherine Bobak
Dan Brooks
Carl Welcome Stukey, Jr.
Platt Talcott
Mia Base
Jjis Chadran
Carole Hunter
Ken Corbin
Bobby Anthony
Julia Reed
Josh Jaschen
Kevin Fannon
Joel Womack
Maxine Louise
Al Byington
Meigs Hodge
Steve Chiabotti
Thomas Lynch
Marianne Trice
Margaret Ashby
Gary Miller
Bairbre Kennedy
Paul Albaugh
Jo Gillespie
Carl M. Smith
Leo Weston
Majorie Klose
Dennis Gross
Francis Jean Wells
Casey Goodson
Wayne Spangler Sr.
Ruth Bartley
Bob Bartley
Jacqueline Dinwiddie
Ted Delaney
Paul Scotten
Dick Bednar
Judy Bednar
Richard C. Edmunds Jr.
How A Thanksgiving Ministry Happened Even In A Pandemic
By Andrea McNicholas, Barbara Fallon, Amy Bacon and Amy Wilcynzski, Thanksgiving 2020 Ministry Coordinators

Christ Church’s Thanksgiving Ministry happened this past year despite the operational challenge of a pandemic, and it was greater than ever! You may ask, maybe in similar fashion to the people in Whoville, “But How? Didn’t COVID-19 take it all away?” There were no brown paper bags with attached lists given out, no packed brown bags filled with Thanksgiving groceries returned to Christ Church, no sorting of hundreds of cans of cranberry sauce, yams and collard greens, no dozens of volunteers helping guests select Thanksgiving groceries. But with radical ingenuity, generosity and faith, the 2020 Thanksgiving ministry happened. Lazarus ministers volunteered and called every single individual or family who had participated in the Thanksgiving ministry in the past and asked each one how they were doing, were told that Christ Church was thinking of them and were asked if they like help with Thanksgiving in the form of a grocery gift card? After dozens of initial calls and more follow-up calls, we had a list of more than 165 names and addresses. We then asked the congregation if they would just give money instead of buying groceries. The people of Christ Church came through. Enough money was contributed to make it possible to buy families of four or more $100 gift cards and everyone else $50 gift cards. Then we had enough volunteers to pick up, drive and hand out the gift cards to all those people. We were able to deliver groceries to those who are not physically able to go out and buy groceries themselves. We also were able to give gift cards, Thanksgiving craft kits, age-appropriate books on Thanksgiving, as many still are just learning about this great American tradition, food and pumpkin pies to more than 20 refugee families. We did not know when we started how this was going to work out. But we had to make plans and hope that it would all fall into place. And it did. Volunteers signed up to drive all over Alexandria and hand out cards and groceries, in a socially distanced way, parishioners were generous and donated enough funds for the grocery gift cards, a synagogue surprised us with pumpkin pies for the mostly Muslim refugee families, and a Mormon group donated groceries. God was faithful.

Amy Wilczynski, volunteer coordinator: “Despite a few minor challenges, all the deliveries were given and received with a warm smile, kind words of thanks and an unspoken love of human kindness. I appreciate this opportunity to see and feel God’s work at hand.”

Refugee recipient: “Thanksgiving for people is the morning sun and the setting moon, the cheerful bird and the silent waters and the playful dunes, but more than that I cherish you. Wishing you a happy and healthy Thanksgiving Day. Happy thanksgiving to you and your family!”

Volunteer gift card deliverer: “Hello to everyone! I’d like to let you know that I delivered the Thanksgiving dinner to James on Friday. He was very grateful to the church. I also got a chance to meet his son, which was really nice.”
A Christmas Miracle: Christ Child Ministry 2020 brought Christmas to over 200 Children
By Anne Ramsey, Caroline Carbaugh, and Melanie Gray

As you may know, we have been met with the challenge of figuring out how to safely and thoughtfully bring all of our outreach ministries to families in need since the pandemic began in March that includes our beloved Christ Child Ministry. After much thought, preparation and prayer we came up a modified, safe and bountiful Christ Child 2020. We planned over zoom, learned flexibility, and realized that good ideas come from many. We were not tied to “we’ve always done it this way.” We are so very grateful for your generosity to our Christ Child ministry totaling over $21,000! In what is a very difficult time for many in our community, you helped spread Christmas joy to 106 families in Alexandria. More than 200 children woke up with Christmas gifts and Christmas dinner. Families also received a Giant gift card as well as, for each child, a $100 Target or Walmart gift card, a card from Christ Church, a cuddly fleece blanket, and a stocking filled with small gifts and much love. The stockings and gift bags were assembled in the churchyard by a small group of volunteer elves led by Caroline Carbaugh.

In the words of one of our neighbors when she received her Christ Child package:
“Thank you for blessing my family with such thoughtful gifts. We really appreciate it. May God continue to bless you all. It brought tears to my eyes knowing that there’s someone who actually cares.”

A note from one of our refugee families:
Couple of days ago I received your Christmas gifts, you can never imagine how happy I was with all the gifts, I felt Santa visited my house this year! Thanks much to you and everyone at Christ church and everyone helped spreading the season joy and sharing it! I received my Giant gift card as well, and as always stand speechless before your kindness! Merry Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, hope you enjoy a very happy holiday with family and friends!

The work of the outreach ministries is done in grateful response to the love of God given to us in Jesus Christ. We are called to live out Christ’s love that brings transformation and new life, and we could not do so without you or the many community partners we are honored to have. We are grateful to our friends at Fairlington United Methodist Church for donating the fleece blankets; Rock Spring United Church of Christ for donating the grocery gift cards for refugee families and coordinating deliveries to these families; an anonymous donor for providing the funds to purchase the stocking gifts; Lazarus counselors for delivering gifts; and the Christ Church parishioners who prepped the packages for distribution.

One of Caroline’s favorite moments was the Zoom coffee hour with past Christ Child volunteers and Patrice Hall, our liaison to the Boys and Girls Club. This was our way of staying connected to those who couldn’t be together. Caroline found this new way of doing things sustained her faith and made her feel proud and humbled, “I believe that this program supports our volunteers’ spirituality too. I realized how blessed our congregation is.”

God stepped in at the last minute as we were picking a gift to take to Patrice for all of her hard work and commitment at the Boys and Girls Club. The gift was a pewter ornament—a lamb with a cross behind it from Christ Church. Patrice said that the ornament held special significance to her. Years ago, God called her through the image of a lamb to feed the children; she didn’t know how but figured it out, therefore the lamb holds very special significance to her. The Holy Spirit works in amazing ways.
Evolving Refugee Ministry Continues Providing Needed Assistance in A Pandemic

By Carla Thompson

When Amy Bacon volunteered for the Refugee Ministry almost three years ago, she was assigned a family who had been through extraordinary hardship. After a difficult life in Afghanistan, they spent four years in a refugee camp in Pakistan before arriving here with their two young children. Amy and many refugee ministry volunteers helped them navigate in their new country, providing support to connect them to available services, taking them to appointments, and guiding them in learning their way around their new community. However, her greatest gift to them was friendship. Moreover, that gift was returned in kind. Today, Amy considers that family her family, and they feel the same. So much so, that Amy was asked to be in the delivery room for the birth of their child.

Amy says, “The strength of this ministry is in building trusting relationships. These refugee families have been through so much, and we can better help them once we have a personal connection.”

The nearly five-year-old Refugee Ministry works through volunteer care teams to help support refugee families recently arrived in the area to help them settle here in the United States. Most of the refugees are from Afghanistan, many of whom qualified for Special Immigration Visas (SIV) because their work for the U.S. military or other U.S. government positions that put them in danger if they remained in their country. We recognized that as Christians, our call to help our neighbors in need meant our newly arrived Muslim brothers and sisters. Never had we forged bonds so deeply. Unlike many of our ministries, which are touchpoints in a person’s life in this ministry we were and are committing to the long term, to deep relationships, to building community.

By early 2020, members of Christ Church were joined by members of Grace Episcopal, Emmanuel Episcopal, Immanuel on the Hill, Westminster Presbyterian and Rock Spring United Church of Christ, to connect with 37 families and work with existing resettlement agencies to provide support. Additionally, we have received support from Christ Church Gift Shop, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Diocese of Virginia Region IV, Virginia Theological Seminary, Fairlington United Methodist Church and Goodwin House.

At the beginning of this ministry in early 2016, support for families often took the form of helping them to acquire furniture, enroll children in school, adults sign up for English classes, learn their way around the area, visit parks and libraries, find doctors, and gain employment. We received generous donations from individuals, faith communities and grants, we were able to offer financial assistance for rent and other essential items required for them to live here safely until they were stabilized. In January 2020, 10 families needed help with rent, five newer families needed their total rent paid and five needed less than half.

“They have overcome so many obstacles and are truly grateful and appreciative of the small acts of kindness we provide. Helping them get to appointments and navigate school registration may seem like simple acts, but they can be daunting for these families,” adds Amy.

The pandemic has had a tremendous impact on our refugee families, many of whom were underemployed before the pandemic struck. For a ministry based on relationships, it has been a challenge to not see one another in person. Of the twenty-four families active in the ministry today all are facing tremendous hardship because most still work in the gig economy, including loss of hours or total loss of employment.

The refugee ministry has continued to help guide families throughout

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the pandemic. Computers were provided to multiple families this year so they are able to continue with English classes virtually, and to pursue educational training that will help with future employment opportunities. One of our primary roles in 2020 was helping families apply for rent relief funds and other public benefits that were made available during the pandemic. We helped them understand their rights during the eviction moratorium. We also advocated for many who lived in apartments where repair needs were not being addressed or where they were being charged unfairly. We had an intern from Princeton University last summer and two last fall who became integral members of the Refugee team. They created and filled buckets designed for each child that was part of a picnic package delivered to each family for a virtual July picnic. Our summer intern along with Christ Church member Barbara Fallon conducted check in interviews via phone with each family that helped us determine what was most needed. Once we realized that many of our refugee children did not have masks, the interns made masks for each child using age appropriate and fun fabric. Refugee ministry interns created a Zoom discussion group for women in the community to practice English while connecting virtually with each other on Saturdays throughout the fall. In addition, care teams and refugee ministry leadership continue to check in with families to see how they are coping.

At the end of the year, Christ Church included all our refugee families in the Thanksgiving Ministry which included a grocery gift card, individualized books for each child about the history of Thanksgiving and Temple Beth-El donated 25 pumpkin pies to our refugee Thanksgiving baskets. These pies were bought by Jews, delivered by Christians and eaten by Muslims. For Christmas each child received a $100 gift card to Target and Christmas stockings thanks to the generosity of member so Christ Church. Rock Spring United Methodist Church donated $100 Giant gift cards to each family, Fairlington United Methodist purchased fleece blankets for each child and an anonymous donor from Immanuel on the Hill donated stocking stuffers.

From some of our refugee families:
Couple of days ago I received your Christmas gifts, you can never imagine how happy I was with all the gifts, I felt Santa came and visited my house this year!
Thanks much to you and everyone at Christ church and everyone helped spreading the season joy and sharing it! Thank you and Merry Christmas with a joyful smile, I gave the gift card to my son of which he was so happily surprised with! As always stand speechless before your kindness!
Merry, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, hope you enjoy a very happy holiday with family and friends!

Ministry volunteer Barbara Fallon said, “Even though the ministry adapted well to the challenges of 2020, I’m looking forward to seeing all members of the family that I’m assigned to and meeting their newborn. I have taken the oldest children out for safe outside activities like a pumpkin patch and playgrounds. One of the family members told me, ‘You are our family in the U.S.,’ and they have definitely become part of mine.”
In 2021, we continue to walk with our brothers and sisters through what we anticipate will continue to be a difficult year. For many, we are their only connection in their new home, their American family. We will continue in our efforts to keep us all safe, in every way possible.