



WELS* Worship and COVID-19

by Bryan Gerlach

On March 16, when the Centers for Disease Control had recently recommended that public gatherings be limited to no more than 50 people, WELS President Mark Schroeder shared some guidelines and perspectives. How quickly things changed from 50 to 10! Also in March, WELS shared guidelines about livestreaming worship, including a list of congregations already doing so. Both March 16 articles, from regular “Together” updates, can easily be found online at <https://wels.net/news-media/together/>.

On March 24, Northwestern Publishing House made

available 80 hymns for free download, drawn from the Lent, Easter, Redeemer, Trust, Faith, Prayer, and Nation sections of our hymnal (CW). Available files include PDF, TIFF, and full M4A recordings (both organ and piano options). These were made available for individuals and families and for churches not using other licensing options. See <https://online.nph.net/cw-hymn-downloads>.

After the March mandates to limit gatherings, many congregations upgraded from streaming just the sermon to streaming the entire service—“forcing un-tech-savvy

Pastor Brian Hackmann preaches to an empty church with hymnals removed at historic Grace in downtown Milwaukee.

clerics into uncharted waters” (Dan McLaughlan, “Church from Home,” National Review [April 2, 2020], <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2020/04/20/church-from-home%e2%80%88/>). Week by week they improved their AV editing skills. They figured out how to position four singers six feet apart and how to achieve a balanced sound with organ or piano. And they were profoundly thanked by members who deeply missed gathering for worship.

Lisa Uttech, vocalist in the Easter video mentioned below and director of parish music at Christ the Lord Lutheran Church, Brookfield, WI (where I’m a member) shares these comments about planning worship under “safer at home.”

The overwhelming response from members has been a new-found, deep appreciation for being “in church.” While they recognize that church exists outside of the bounds of a physical

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structure, there is a heightened awareness of the precious freedom we have in being able to gather together as the body of Christ to worship, to share one another’s burdens, to pray for each other. After the very first livestreamed service, a friend texted me words of appreciation: “How quickly this makes you realize how blessed we were to be able to walk into church every Sunday and that we should never take it for granted!” Additionally, our musicians are so thankful and eager to assist with worship for any service. They feel fortunate just for the opportunity to be in the sanctuary and to provide worship opportunities for our members and the church at large.

And our pastor, Phil Casmer, comments:

Every week I have this moment where our worship-team camaraderie is showing while we’re doing our best together to bring excellent worship to God’s people at home. We joke and we laugh and we rejoice when it works. But it’s usually followed by a hollow feeling. I look over the empty pews as we become quiet for the microphones to go live; a select few are singing the hymns and helping with responses; the pastor waits for the tech’s high-sign to know that he’s live on screen. And I realize: it’s a joy to prepare worship and to present it to God’s people, and I love all the people I work with to make it happen ... but I cannot wait until God’s

people are sitting here with us. And I pray I never take that for granted again.

WELS national chose not to compete with local efforts for Easter but did offer a nationwide Easter evening service, “Together at the Empty Tomb.” This is still available at wels.net. Between Vimeo and Facebook, up to 25,000 people watched the livestream on April 12. This high-quality video features a song slated for the new WELS hymnal (Advent 2021 first use): “All Is Well,” by Steve and Vikki Cook—a powerful text for our current crisis context. See also “Crises, Hymns, and Faith” at worship.welsrc.net/ under “Worship the Lord.” This article shares additional new hymns or settings available for free download.

“All Is Well” is also featured at this site: <https://welscongregational-services.net/download/w014/>. One of the vocalists is a communications professor at Wisconsin Lutheran College. To know that her husband recently died of cancer (before the COVID-19 crisis) makes this rendition of the song all the more compelling. See also her 2019 book, *Purposeful Grieving* (<https://online.nph.net/purposeful-grieving.html>).

The WELS president’s March 16 message included this: “Recognize that this is an extraordinary opportunity to let

our light shine in the ways that our congregations and their members serve the people in their communities in Christian love.” And that people who don’t really know Christ might discover not only Christian love but also Christian gospel! That’s our ongoing mission, whether “safer at home” or back to normal.



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as a parish pastor, he served churches in El Paso, TX, and Citrus Hts., CA. Trained also as a musician (M Ch M, Concordia University Chicago), he plays organ both in Brookfield, WI, and at historic Grace Lutheran Church, the 170-year-old founding church of the WELS in downtown Milwaukee, WI.

Photos courtesy the author.

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*Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod