

Celebrating Easter Sunday in the virtual world

By CINDY WEELDREYER
SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL

Easter Sunday morning in Cottage Grove is often cloudy and wet, but not this year.

The sun shone brilliantly as members of Calvary Chapel parked their vehicles outside the church in the Village Shopping Center to follow Governor Kate Brown's social distancing orders while still collectively participating in their church service — virtually, at least.

They tuned into the service via an FM station, with many using their phones or computer tablets to concurrently watch the broadcast on Facebook.

Pastor Jeff Smith and the worship team conducted the praise and worship segment inside, then Smith went outside with his guitar to deliver his Easter Sunday message. Church members responded to the service at different times using their vehicle horns.

On March 9, Governor Brown issued a State of Emergency in response to the deadly worldwide coronavirus pandemic in order to "flatten the curve" of outbreaks here in Oregon so hospitals would not be overwhelmed with victims.

The initiative order prohibited gatherings of 25 people or more. On March 23, she tightened the restrictions with her "Stay Home, Save Lives" order prohibiting all non-essential social and recreational gatherings regardless of size, if a distance of at least 6 feet between individuals cannot be maintained.

Churches throughout the world have been radically impacted by the virus. The



COURTESY PHOTO

Vehicles line the parking lot to listen in on the Easter service for the Calvary Chapel, which broadcasted its April 12 service on a low-frequency FM station, with participants voicing their "Amen" with honking horns.

restrictions forced at least seven local church pastors to move their Sunday services online to continue spiritually feeding their flock. It was a steep learning curve at first and they had to adjust to delivering their message to an invisible congregation. Some offer a live experience on their Facebook page or website, while others offer a pre-recorded message.

Calvary Chapel Pastor Smith said Easter 2020 was the church's 21st anniversary and it was bittersweet to not be able to celebrate the milestone face-to-face. He said the current situation forces him to be more creative in how he stays in touch.

"Having drive-in church was hard but actually exciting for the people as they found new ways to communicate 'amen' by their

beeping horns." Smith said. "I'm now contacting people on Facebook, by email or by calling them just to pray for them."

Tim Baker pastors the Sixth and Gibbs Church. He said Easter was a very different experience for his family because he pre-recorded his message and joined other church members as they sat in their homes and watched it together.

"Despite it being different from the norm, we still shared the message of Jesus and His resurrection and His name was still praised," he said.

Trinity Lutheran Church Pastor Jim Markus said the restrictions came during the middle of the Lenten season, which features two weekly worship services. His goal in creating the virtual experience was to

provide a sense of familiarity and normalcy to his congregation and maintain a connection to Christ and each other.

United Methodist Church pastor, the Rev. Dr. Craig Pesti-Strobel, overcame initial hurdles and is now pre-recording music via YouTube and providing a visual message that is posted on the church website.

He described how the Methodists experienced Easter Sunday, explaining he "... utilized several videos featuring pastors and their families throughout our conference to serve as the Greeting, Prayer of Preparation, Scripture Reading, and Corporate Prayer in addition to my own sermon, words of greeting and so on."

Rev. Karen Hill of the First Presbyterian Church

said, while she missed the church's Easter traditions such as breakfast and children's Easter egg hunt, she is pleased they embraced the difference the virus created.

"We began our online service with Easter music and I gave a short meditation on the Easter story," she said. "We then invited our congregation to watch a service offered by our denomination and worshipped with other members of the body of Christ across the nation."

Living Faith Assembly began live streaming its Sunday service on March 29. Pastor Rulon Combs said they will continue doing so and expressed what an adjustment it has been for him.

"We have chosen for several reasons to continue doing live services every weekend. I'm still getting used to speaking just to the worship team and the tech team," Combs said. "Although we have to recalibrate the way we share the Gospel, we are reaching more people than we ever have before."

Cottage Grove Bible Church Pastor Bob Singer said the new format is different but their church is making it work and there have been benefits as well. "It was strange preaching to the choir," Singer said, "but there have been unforeseen benefits also with increased participation. Now, with three weeks

of experience, pastors say it is getting easier and the online experience is improving.

All are thankful technology allows them to continue to touch people's lives and proclaim the love of Jesus to all who tune in.

For church members who do not have Internet service, pastors are going "old-school" making regular phone calls offering prayer and encouragement. Several churches are responding to community calls for help. Some pastors agree there is an upside to being a virtual church.

Singer and Combs noted they are reaching more people than ever before. Singer includes a strong Gospel message each week because he doesn't know who is watching.

All the pastors look forward to feeding their flock face-to-face again and say they are hopeful going forward. Recognizing it is a different and challenging time, they have confidence their congregations will get through it and will be stronger because of it.

Singer said he anticipates the Church in America will also be stronger than it was before it began.

Markus said, "In this realm of death in which we all live, we continue to proclaim that Jesus has conquered death for all of us and He is with us in this current crisis."

A list of churches offering virtual services is available on the calendar page at www.knnd.com.

KNND also offers its Sunday Morning Light program from 7 a.m. to 10 a.m. to provide spiritual encouragement in this time of national crisis.

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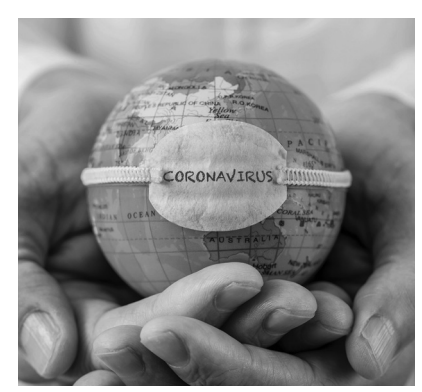
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