

Photography courtesy of Ryan Price



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# reflections from the senior pastor

## Coming Together (While Staying Six Feet Apart)

Dear Friends Church Family,

Welcome to the first-ever Epistle of Friends Congregational Church. Rather than the previous monthly e-newsletter that gave updates and announcements already available elsewhere (This Week At Friends, Sunday's worship guide), this quarterly e-magazine offers news about what our community of faith has been doing in recent weeks. In the last four-plus months of the COVID-19 era, our church has been anything but dormant.

Weekly online gatherings for check-in and prayer, and midweek evening communion services have kept us engaged with our God and one another. Giving opportunities—like contributing from our stimulus checks to support Scotty's House, the Brazos Interfaith Immigration Network, and our Pilgrims in the Park neighbors needing food and lodging; the United Church of Christ's "Strengthen the Church" mission offering; and the crisis fund for our members facing financial struggles—have kept our treasure and our hearts focused on one another, the community and the world.

Volunteer efforts—such as the new food distribution ministry started in collaboration with our neighbor church Peace Lutheran for those who are unable to afford groceries; and the youth group helping Habitat for Humanity to welcome neighbors into their new home—are putting our faith into action. And the virtual worship services on Sundays continue bringing us together for opportunities to give God praise, and to nurture our understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and its calling in our lives. From honoring our high school graduates to welcoming new members despite a global pandemic, we are nurturing and advancing the life of Friends Church in these peculiar days.

As the earliest Christians read the epistles we now find in the Bible's New Testament, read this first Epistle to stay engaged with the faith we share and put into practice.

Peace,  
Dan De Leon, Senior Pastor





## from the desk of pastor trent

Friends,

We are excited about this new format for our newsletter, and hope that you enjoy reading it! Feel free to share it with others who might want to know a little more about our community of faith—we believe it's going to be a wonderful glimpse into the life of Friends Church.

As we prepare to begin another month of physical distancing and uncertainty in our community and our world, I want to thank you for your ongoing faithfulness and courage. There is much that is on our hearts and minds, much weighing us down, and in these days, community is even more important for our mutual wellbeing. You have stayed faithful and connected, and been creative and flexible in making sure that everyone in our community knows that they are important and not alone. You have

taken good care of your church staff, and made sure that we know we are valued and loved. And you have been generous in giving to our community, making sure that those in need have what they need. Thank you. Together, with the Spirit's guidance, may we all know that we are held in the arms of Love.

*"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

—Romans 8:38-39



# A GRATEFUL SPIRIT

## Thanks and shout outs from our Friends

First and foremost, I would like to thank Kathleen Witte-Ninke. Without all of her hard work, this first issue of The Epistle would not have been possible. When I let my mouth run ahead of my brain during a meeting of the Communications Committee and said "What if we tried to release the first issue this month," she stepped up and volunteered to take on the most in-depth, labor intensive articles. Her willing spirit and can-do attitude were an enormous blessing.

Thank you so much!  
Lauren Vasselli, editor

Dear Dan and Friends Congregation,

Thank you for your recent donation to Scotty's House. Your generous gift allows children victimized by abuse or neglect throughout the Brazos Valley to receive essential services such as forensic interviews, medical exams, and counseling sessions. I was truly moved by your generous gift. Support such as yours continues to ensure that Scotty's House can adapt to the changing demands presented by the COVID-19 global pandemic. By adapting our programs, such as transitioning counseling services to an online HIPAA-compliant platform, we have been able to continue providing services in the safest ways possible. I've included a graphic that helps visualize our impact since mid-March. While provision of services may look a little different now, the mission is still the same: safety, healing, and justice for children victimized by abuse.

Wishing you all health,  
Cary Baker

Dear Friends Church  
Family,

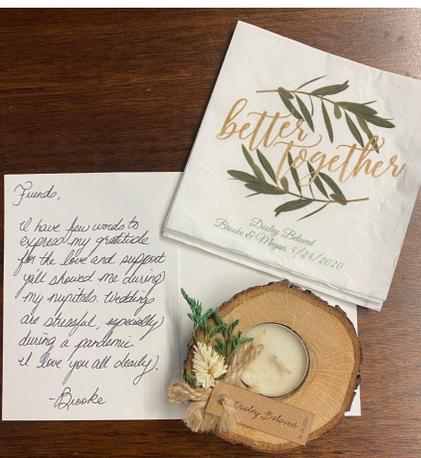
Thank you so much for  
the thoughtful  
graduation gift and the  
awesome parade. I am  
grateful to be a part of  
such a loving church  
family. I am excited for  
the PATHS program and  
glad I can continue to  
worship at Friends.

Love & Blessings,  
Abigail Junek

Friends,

I have few words to express my gratitude for the love and support y'all showed me during my nuptials. Weddings are stressful, especially during a pandemic. I love you all dearly.

-Brooke



# SPIRITUAL LIFE

The Spiritual Life Team is working on developing different offerings for our Friends. We are looking for your input as to what kind of programs in which you would like to participate. Below you will find some possibilities. Please let us know what interests you. Also, if you have ideas not provided here, please let us know what they are. Our team thanks you for your input. You can reach the Spiritual Life chair, Jodie Robinson, at [spirit\\_develop@friends-ucc.org](mailto:spirit_develop@friends-ucc.org), or contact the church office.

## CHURCH WIDE BOOK CLUB

Come join us for a more traditional book study group.

We will choose a book, give everyone a month to read, and then come together for a one time Zoom discussion. We will focus on inspirational books by both classical as well as modern spiritual writers like Thomas Merton or Nadia Bolz Weber. We will plan to read four books in the course of a year.

## SOUL FRIENDS SMALL GOUPS

We will also continue to offer our Soul Friends small groups this fall, and more information about signing up for those will be shared soon. Thank you for your input and participation. We look forward to sharing your spiritual journey!

## QUEERING THE BIBLE

Every few years, we feel it's important to offer a series on how to read the bible from an LGBTQ affirming perspective, and give you the tools to counter the harmful messages and "clobber passages" that some Christians use to denying the full equality of queer people. This year, we'll offer a video series that you can view and interact with at your own pace. Pastor Trent will lead this series.

## SPIRITUAL DISCOVERY

We are a church of action, serving the world with love. Sometimes, to find the energy and purpose to serve God's people, we need to recharge. Spiritual Discovery is about turning inward to take care of the soul, the God-light inside each one of us. Many of the ways to do this are listed below.

- Contemplative Prayer/Meditation
- The Labyrinth
- Spiritual Journaling
- Finding spirituality in these difficult times
- Spirituality and Aging
- Spirituality for Women/Men/Singles
- Lectio Divina (meditating on scripture, poetry, etc.)
- Communing with Nature (Celtic spirituality)
- Spiritual Direction (a certified director will become your companion on your spiritual journey)
- The FIND School of Spiritual Direction

## SMALL GROUP MINISTRIES

We will help develop groups based on certain characteristics of our congregation. Each group will determine its purpose. For example, a women's group may want to gather to discuss women's issues, supporting and listening to each other. Some options include:

- Women
- Men
- Co-ed
- Retired
- Intergenerational
- Parents of Young Children
- Young Adult
- LGBTQ

# MEET THE TEAM

In June, Friends Church voted for new leadership to serve on our church's ministry teams. Say hello to our newest servant-leaders!



**CHRIS ABBOTT**  
**ASSOCIATE PASTORAL RELATIONS**

Chris will serve on the Pastoral Relations Team to support, encourage, and assist Pastor Trent.



**COLLIN ARLEDGE**  
**SENIOR PASTORAL RELATIONS**

Collin will serve on the Pastoral Relations Team to support, encourage, and assist Pastor Dan.



**NANCY BERTSCH**  
**ASSOCIATE PASTORAL RELATIONS**

Nancy will serve on the Pastoral Relations Team to support, encourage, and assist Pastor Trent.



**DAVID CARLSON**  
**FINANCIAL SECRETARY**

David will monitor all deposits and donations to the Church, reconcile financial statements, and provide quarterly giving reports.



**CARL FAHRENWALD**  
**STEWARDSHIP CHAIR**

David will coordinate the annual stewardship campaign and wider church offerings, as well as assist with the new year's budget.



**LINDA FITZWATER**  
**SENIOR PASTORAL RELATIONS**

Linda will serve on the Pastoral Relations Team to support, encourage, and assist Pastor Dan.



**BRIAN GILSON**  
**CONGREGATIONAL REPRESENTATIVE**

Brian will serve as a voice for the congregation and act as a liaison to the Church Council.



**BILL HARPER**  
**MODERATOR OF TRUSTEES**

Bill will serve as the chair of the Board of Trustees and act as the Board's liaison to Church Council.



**ANDREW MCNEELY**  
**JUSTICE & MISSION CHAIR**

Andrew will coordinate the Justice and Mission committee and lead community outreach and charity projects.



**LORETTA MENDEZ**  
**TREASURER**

Loretta will manage disbursements of funds and payroll information and assist with the preparation of the budget.



**LAUREN PUENTE**  
**PERSONNEL CHAIR**

Lauren will lead the Personnel committee and make hiring recommendations to Church Council.



**CRISTINA RAMIREZ**  
**NURTURE CHAIR**

Cristina will lead the Nurture Ministry and provide care and encouragement to Church members and families.



**JANET RICHARDS**  
**WORSHIP CHAIR**

Janet will cooperate with the Pastors to develop Worship experiences for the congregation.



**ANNA TRANSUE**  
**OUTREACH & EVANGELISM CHAIR**

Anna will be responsible for the visibility of Friends Church in the community and coordinate our online presence.



**JACKIE WOMACK**  
**FELLOWSHIP CHAIR**

Jackie will coordinate opportunities for members of Friends Church to participate in our community of faith.



**RYAN WOMACK**  
**FELLOWSHIP CHAIR**

Ryan will coordinate opportunities for members of Friends Church to participate in our community of faith.

Friends Church is fortunate to have had so many dedicated individuals serving during a time of great uncertainty. The leadership's work this spring helped keep the community connected even though we could not be physically together.

Every July we say thank you and goodbye to half the church leadership team. As hard as it is to bid farewell to excellent servant leaders, I am also excited by the energy of our incoming leaders. These wonderful people essentially said yes to you, our community, and yes to serving during a pandemic!

I am hopeful that the leadership team can find new and exciting ways to engage our church family. This should be accomplished through safe, appropriately sized groups, activities, Zoom calls, and whatever other creative ideas spring to life! If you have an idea on how to engage the congregation, please share it with me at [moderator@friends-ucc.org](mailto:moderator@friends-ucc.org) or with our Congregational Representatives, Jill Fouch and Brian Gilson, at [congreg\\_rep@friends-ucc.org](mailto:congreg_rep@friends-ucc.org). It will be up to us all to make the most of what 2020 has to offer.

Kelly Wellman, Moderator

## A NOTE FROM THE MODERATOR



# Preaching to an Empty Church

This is an article about the transition to online services and the church staff's experiences.

**“The church is not the building, but it is the people.”**

This refrain resounds in Senior Pastor Dan De Leon’s mind as he and the Friends Congregational Church leadership team make a weekly decision to keep worship virtual-only during the COVID-19 pandemic. So, what has virtual church been like for our worship leaders including Pastor Dan, Associate Pastor Trent Williams, and Director of Music Ministries Chris Hoffman?

We decided to ask.

## **Question 1: What has been the most difficult part of virtual church?**

**Pastor Dan:** Aside from the obvious—not being able to physically be with my people—the most difficult part of virtual church is doing what I’m charged to do as a pastoral minister under these unprecedented constraints: offer worship experiences meant to transform people’s lives... However, it’s forced me to recognize and take confidence in the fact that we can still do this. Despite the absence of human interaction in the sanctuary at the moment the camera is on, we can create transformative worship experiences that point to hope, faith, new life, and limitless love.

The second most difficult part of virtual church is how much more the ministerial staff is having to rely on technology and to constantly be learning new things about it to make worship more effective. We’ve dealt with hiccups from Facebook, stubborn internet, faulty email, and technical issues for days, but the reliance on this method of bringing worship to the congregation has wiped out our weekends entirely. Saturdays are spent finishing sermons, videoing the remaining portions of the service, editing the service, and then uploading and publishing it to stream, while Sundays are filled with online classes, worship, youth group, committee meetings, and, in recent weeks, activism.

(Continued next page)

Finding rest and renewal in this new weekly routine that nudges us to always be learning more in order to stay on top of the ground literally shifting under our feet is difficult.

**Chris Hoffman:** For me, the most difficult part of virtual church is the extra time spent to make all of the moving parts happen. In preparing the music for each Sunday, there's this strange psychological phenomenon that I have found all music directors are experiencing, in that there is more pressure to perform "perfectly," since everything is recorded, aired online, and saved forever... This also applies to our amazing volunteers who have allowed themselves to be recorded, whether it's the full virtual choir, or virtual soloists and small ensembles... [Eventually the musicians] send me their video, and with my computer programs at

home, I combine the musical files into a cohesive whole... When our first virtual choir sang "The Lord Bless You and Keep You," a piece less than two minutes in length, I spent 22 hours compiling and editing those files (that right there is the main reason why I will be happy if I can crank out one virtual choir anthem a month). Let me say, I am NOT a recording engineer, but it is somewhat fun trying to develop a brand new skill set.

**Pastor Trent:** The most difficult part of virtual church is not being able to see and talk with and hug everyone. I miss those moments of connection—the laughs, the tears, the sense of family that we have when we're together. I'm grateful for the ways that we are able to stay connected in these strange days, but I long for the day when we're able to be back together physically.

## Question 2: What has been the BEST part of virtual church?

**Pastor Trent:** The best part of virtual church has been the opportunity to connect with and engage folks from other parts of the country in our worship services and virtual gatherings. One of the gifts of this time might be the chance to broaden our vision and continue to engage people in our faith community even if they don't live here.

**Pastor Dan:** A couple of the best things about virtual church have been its reach and its empowerment of the congregation's creative support. The reach is in how the online services have brought more people to us than was possible

before when we were meeting in person... We have seen former members of our church come back to join us for worship, fringe members become more frequent in their attendance, and people from all over the country joining us online. The empowerment of the congregation's creative support is in the contributions from church members that we are seeing every Sunday, offering lay leadership, children's messages, and even music from home.

**Hoffman:** The best part of virtual church is that we still get to HAVE church! We live in an era where technology makes it possible to experience

a worship service without being present... Ten years ago, I don't think we would have been able to do this. On the music side of things, it is wonderful to have the technology to create music for each other online. There have been many times in history when music and singing could not happen--either because it was banned, or just plain not safe to do so... I am also grateful that when streaming a service live on Facebook or on

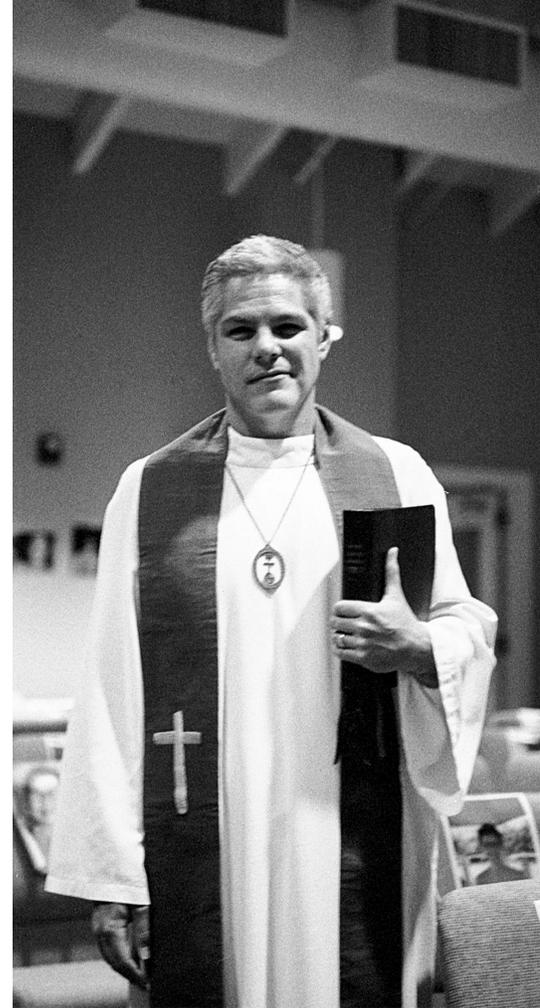
YouTube, there are comment bars that allow for live comments, greetings, and other interactions. Not only has this welcomed our local "regulars" into the online service, but it also has pulled in worshippers from around the country. My family in Iowa is now able to tune in to watch a service live, and I was even able to bring one of our former choir members (who now lives in Minnesota) back into the "virtual choir fold."

## Question 3: What has been the WEIRDEST part of virtual church?

**Hoffman:** For me, the weirdest part of virtual church is performing for an empty sanctuary. There is a different energy when you are surrounded by your church family, and you cannot replicate that with an empty space. Seeing the pictures of members taped to the chairs in the sanctuary was definitely a nice surprise though, and brought us one step closer to the feeling of having our beloved church family in the space with us. The most surprising part of virtual church is that for me, a self-proclaimed dunce at technology (I always tell people "I'm an acoustic musician for a reason!"), I could actually learn how to do (simple) audio and video editing for musical offerings. The learning curve was and is definitely not like what a younger person might have (let's be real, I am at an age where people in their early thirties and younger can just whiz past me when it comes to navigating technology). It may take me longer, but with each project, I become just a little bit faster, and learn how to add other technological techniques to these projects. But I'm definitely NOT going to do a career change anytime soon!

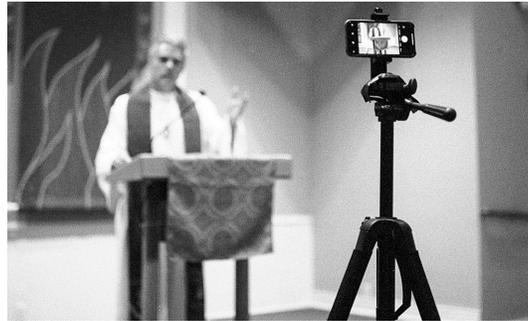
**Pastor Trent:** The strangest thing about virtual church is leading worship and preaching to an empty room. There's a natural dynamic in a live service that just isn't there, and I've discovered that you really have to think differently to effectively lead worship in this way. I've also been surprised at how much more work it is to put church online...sometimes it's twice as much work than a live service would be.

**Pastor Dan:** One of the weirdest things about virtual church has been our unnecessary effort at perfection. We pre-record the services, so when we hit record and shift into worship leadership mode, we want to bring our best, knowing that people will not only be watching it together on Sunday morning, but that it will be out there for anyone to view any time after that. It adds undue pressure to our delivery... If there's any pastoral point I can make here in line with a parent saying, "Do as I say, not as I do," it's that trying to be perfect is an exhausting waste of time, and it makes God laugh. Don't do it. A surprising thing about virtual church is how much people are



coming to love it. I often hear from church members that it will be difficult to get them to return to the sanctuary now that they have the ability to just roll out of bed, keep their pjs on, pour a cup of coffee and engage the worship experience on a screen while interacting with their beloved church members in a comments section more than they would be able to in the

semi-formality of physically gathered church.... It is clear that no matter what happens moving forward, we will have to maintain our online presence and continue making it more inclusive and impactful. Another weird thing about virtual church is sitting with my family at home on Sunday mornings and looking at myself on a screen. Who is that guy? Weird.



## STEPS FORWARD

We also checked in with Kelly Wellman and Cathy Hansen to discuss the changes in our church's operations and their vision for the coming year.

While the abrupt closure of the church building was unexpected, Wellman is hopeful that it will lead to positive, lasting changes. Hosting virtual Council meetings has made it "more convenient for guests who must make presentations to Council," and she hopes that "when we are able to return to in person meetings, some form of virtual meetings will be a regular part of business" in order to make Church Council meetings more inclusive to the congregation as a whole.

Hansen says that church operations will "continue to adapt and change, but only if we watch, notice, observe, hear, listen, and ask questions to clarify and help us understand where people are, what they are thinking, feeling, and needing that we can provide."

She believes that our collective comfort level with virtual meetings will increase, "as will our knowledge of the best way to make small groups, online gatherings, communal sharing of experiences, and worship together as a faith community happen."

How can we all support our Pastors and Church Council going forward? Wellman asks that we "increase communications with various committees and leadership," and that congregation members reach out to the Congregational Representatives ([congreg\\_rep@friends-ucc.org](mailto:congreg_rep@friends-ucc.org)) to offer constructive feedback and suggestions.

Hansen's recommendation is to carefully consider our outlook: "We can feel imposed upon, bothered, that our lives are disrupted, impossible, threatened, or we can look at the possibilities, challenges, new opportunities, greater scope of outreach, and potential for broadening our faith community and service to all."

# NEWS FROM THE NATIONAL CHURCH

## GENERAL SYNOD 2021 WILL BE ALL VIRTUAL

For the first time, the United Church of Christ General Synod will be held entirely online in 2021 due to the Coronavirus pandemic.

"Factoring heavily into our discernment is the likelihood that COVID-19 will be an ongoing presence in our country, requiring our continued vigilance to assure the safety of our neighbors," wrote the UCC Board leadership team in a June 3 letter to the church. Hosting an in-person conference in Kansas City would have placed an enormous strain on Church leadership as well as local congregations, who would have to worry about travel arrangements and lodging in an increasingly uncertain situation.

"We have been watching the church adjust overnight to living in a virtual world," said John Dorhauer, UCC General Minister and President. "One of the consistent reactions was if we do this -- we don't just do Synod in a virtual environment. We learn all we can about how to succeed in a digital environment and adjust the Synod experience to that."

The UCC has already released the theme and logo for this year's conference. The theme will be "Rooted in Faith," and Rev. Penny Lowes, moderator of General Synod 33 says "The beautiful image of a colorful tree rooted near living water is a perfect logo for the challenging times in which we find ourselves. As diverse members of the United Church of Christ, our many roots entwine to give us resilience and strength."



## FEED YOUR SPIRIT WITH MIDWEEK OFFERING FROM THE UCC

### Tuesdays for Nurture

Tuesdays for Nurture is a webinar series in which we faithfully focus on education for the people of God. Topics from faith-filled politics, to interviews of key leaders, to "how to's" in congregational life, to the impacts of current realities on the life of the church will be featured.

Upcoming topics include:

- Building Bridges of Faith Across Political Divides (08/18)
- Supporting Your Pastor So They Can Support You (08/25)
- Documentary screening of Suppressed: The Fight to Vote (09/01)

### Thursdays for the Soul

Thursdays for the Soul: A webinar series to care for the whole church. Topics are wide ranging, and are focused on the spirituality and care of people. Prayer, worship, music, psalm readings, or compassionate teaching are included.

Upcoming topics include:

- Back to School: The Impossible Choice (08/13)
- Digital Funerals and Grief (08/20)
- Sacred Boundaries (08/27)

To learn more or register for webinars, visit [ucc.org/calendar](http://ucc.org/calendar)





Photo credit: Dan Kiniry

# MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

Speaking with members of Friends Church about their involvement with Black Lives Matter demonstrations in Bryan-College Station

When demonstrations for Black Lives and racial justice erupted in the BCS area, members of Friends Congregational Church were on the front lines.

**Ella Bacak, at 16 years old, wanted to stand up for her fellow Black people.**

“I want to do something so that police will see that Black people’s lives are just as precious,” said Bacak. “Enough is enough.”

Bacak says she felt proud of her church for having a large presence at the demonstrations.

As for the rest of the community’s presence, “I felt shocked by the support around me,” said Bacak. “I felt overwhelmed by the support and also angry that we needed to be there at all.”

For Bacak, it’s a small step toward seeing the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream realized.

(Continued on next page)

**“Speaking our values isn’t easy, but it’s absolutely essential.”**

**-Kenny Wiley**

"I want to see people come together and stop the division. I want to see people value the life of Black people equally."

## Tami Dudo, who is Black and married to a white man, took the whole family, including their two biracial sons.

Originally her husband Justin's suggestion, Dudo says she was "shocked" and "loved the diversity" when she arrived. "I didn't know what to expect and was scared more from those who would disagree with the protest," said Dudo. "I was proud that my boys wanted to go."

Dudo displayed a sign that said "My sons' lives matter" on one side and quoted George Floyd's last words, "Mama," on the other.

Jeremy Dudo, 22, said he was surprised at how many people were participating. Sean Dudo, 18, said he loved the support of the cars honking as they drove by.

"Things will not change until the people that are not directly impacted speak out when they see injustice," said Tami Dudo. "My white husband can reach a different set of people that are willing to listen, than I can as a Black woman--sometimes seen as an angry Black woman."

"We need to be okay being uncomfortable," said Justin Dudo. "Moderates are okay with social justice as long as it doesn't take away anything from them."

The Dudos say it was unsurprising yet gratifying to see their Friends family--of all races--at the demonstrations.

"My family said, 'Well, duh, it's what our church does,'" said Tami Dudo.



Photo Credit: Ryan Price

## Kenny Wiley attended the demonstrations as a local newspaper journalist, searching for the emotional balance that many Black reporters are seeking now.

"I just felt so much out there," said Wiley, who reports for the Bryan-College Station Eagle.

When Wiley took the gig, he understood he was abdicating his ability to participate in demonstrations like these, but he says he didn't expect the mental toll of reporting on them. "It was moving to see so many people, and it was moving also to interview people who had never been to a protest before," said Wiley.

"I heard and saw so many internal and external moments of purpose, of clarity, of conviction — and it was challenging on an emotional level to put forth a posture of neutrality and professionalism on an issue I feel so deeply and strongly about."

"It means so very much to me to be a member of a congregation that seems so willing and even eager to show up for justice in a variety of ways," said Wiley. "Speaking our values isn't easy, but it's absolutely essential."

## Attending a demonstration is just one part of the fight for racial justice. What now?

"I encourage people to continue talking about it and posting about it," said Bacak. "I see my Deaf community posting more but not enough hearing people... Don't stop talking about it and raising awareness!"

"Enough is hard to quantify," said Tami Dudo. "We can always do more... It's important that non-Black people speak up and speak out."

"People don't know exactly the right words to challenge some bigotry they come across, so they say nothing," said Wiley. "It is almost always better to have the conversation than to not have the conversation. Even if you don't have the perfect words or the ideal analysis, bringing up something, even when it's hard, is so important."

# GETTING CONNECTED

On (pre-pandemic) Sundays, the sight of the Friends Church front door--swiftly opening as you approach--has become a familiar, comforting image.

Now, a website redesign aims to bring the same accessible feeling to Friends' virtual "front door," as Associate Pastor Trent Williams calls it.

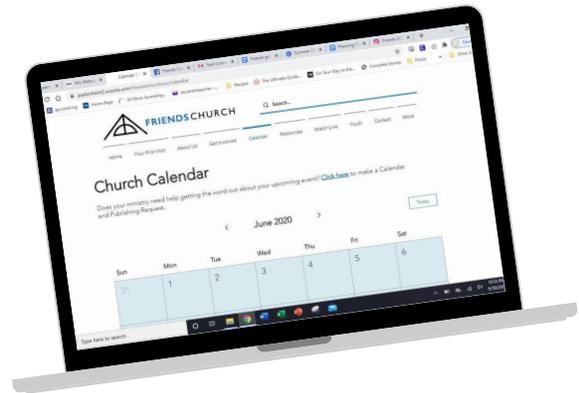
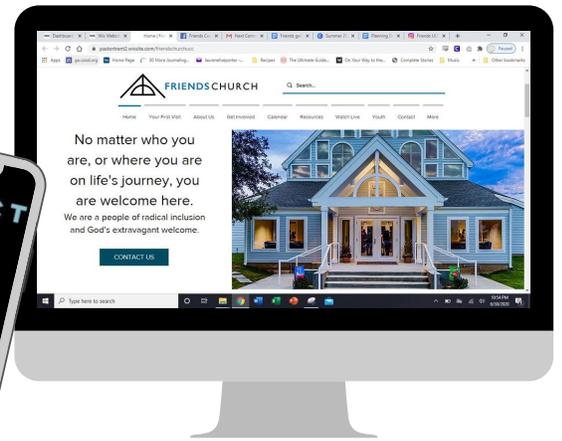
"As an evangelism tool...we wanted to beef that aspect of it up," said Pastor Trent. "We also wanted to make [the website] more of a communications hub, to streamline how we communicate with the congregation and the community."

With that goal in mind, Church Moderator Kelly Wellman and Cecelia Hawkins were chosen to co-chair an ad-hoc communications team to review channels including, primarily, the website. Other team members included Kristin Harper, Lauren Vasselli, Kate Rabe, Kathleen Witte Ninke, and Pastor Trent himself.

"It seemed like a good time to create a new website that reflects [Friends Church's] changes and growth... that would be the 'go to' place for information for newcomers and frequent users alike," Hawkins said.

Under the direction of head designer Vasselli, the team set about choosing a new website platform and completely changing the look, feel, and flow of the website. An emphasis was placed on "findability"--ensuring that frequent and/or new visitors to the site can find what they are looking for, specifically, ways to become involved in non-virtual church life, too. Furthermore, the team focused on aligning the website's message with the church's message: you are welcome here.

To that end, before finishing touches were set, Hawkins wrote and disseminated a "usability study" to 15 church members and new users. While responses were largely positive, an important gap was unveiled.



"One of the major issues that was revealed was an issue with accessibility, particularly for those with visual impairments," said Pastor Trent. "The platform that we were using initially did not have the ability to correct some of these accessibility issues, and although it technically met the standards for our A2A designation, we felt that it did not meet the spirit of our intent to be truly accessible to all. So, we started over with a new platform."

With the accessibility issues addressed, the new website was launched.

Hawkins shares this anonymous response to the usability study question about the overall impression of Friends based on the website:

**"AH! If I were a new visitor, I'd know immediately that my first experience would be remarkable and I'd be so excited with all the possibilities to get involved and make new friends. As someone that is still relatively new to 'being the church,' I say a prayer of thanksgiving. It just fills my heart with joy to have found such an amazing church home. That sentiment is captured in the website. "**

# SPREADING THE NEWS

## Introducing the Communications Subcommittee

"During these COVID-19 times, we are all relying heavily on technology as well as answering the call to creatively engage with one another," said Anna Transue, who is beginning her stint as the chair of the Evangelism and Outreach committee as of July 1. "That takes work and time and dedication."

For a servant leader like Transue--who is also a full-time working parent--the job of engaging online is a big one to tackle alone. Now, she doesn't have to. Evangelism and Outreach will be aided by a brand new communications subcommittee.

Lauren Vasselli, outgoing chair of Evangelism and Outreach, will head the communications subcommittee.

It became apparent that "the task of communicating with

the church was too large of a job for just one or two people," Vasselli said. "The communications subcommittee has pulled together several people with different areas of expertise--from journalism to graphic design to website creation--to keep members of Friends Congregational up to date on our church's happenings."

The subcommittee's primary responsibilities will include maintaining the church website, assisting the Evangelism and Outreach Committee with maintaining the church's social media presence, assisting the front office with the weekly This Week @ Friends email, creating a quarterly e-magazine, and writing press releases on behalf of the church for upcoming events and big announcements. "I think that the creation of the communications subcommittee is

a reflection of the maturity of our church because it shows that we understand the importance of communicating with each other in nuanced and sophisticated ways, even," Transue said. "I think an organization puts resources towards the things they value most; in this sense, adding more support for the work of the Evangelism and Outreach Chair shows that our church family wants to extend our message of 'radical inclusion' to the Bryan/College Station community now more than ever."

As for the question all Friends church members are known to ask, "How can we help?"--Vasselli has a simple answer. "Let us know what is happening!" Vasselli said. "We aren't everywhere at once, so be sure to get in touch with us when something exciting is happening."

**Check out the new Friends Church website for yourself! Find it at the same web address: [friends-ucc.org](http://friends-ucc.org)**

- **Interactive "Calendar" feature accepts RSVPs and calendar requests**
- **"Photo Gallery" displays 40+ years of archived images**
- **Easy sign-ups for church communications**
- **"Get Involved" tab includes all the ways you can participate in church life**
- **"Your First Visit" provides everything a newcomer might need or want to know before visiting and a virtual new visitor card**
- **"Youth" page consolidates all activities available to young people at Friends**
- **Much, much more!**

# YOUNG VOICES

The Friends UCC Youth Group may be missing snacks, hugs and games, but what they aren't lacking during virtual meetings? Meaningful conversation.

"The strangest part is the pandemic really gave us more to talk about," said **Owen Troy**, 15. "Really it kind of improved our youth group."

"The youth group, which usually meets in person on Sunday afternoons, made a quick transition to Zoom meetings in mid-March. Owen says that eventually, the virtual youth group meetings were fairly well-attended, and the youth discussed everything from COVID-19 risks to the politicization of the pandemic to how to handle the isolation.

Still, not everything is the same on a screen.

"What I really miss was at the beginning of each youth group meeting, while we were waiting for people to arrive, we always would just play these silly team-building games, throw marshmallows at other people's cup tower," said Owen. "It just helped us bond, and it was lots of fun. We got to know each other before we had intense conversations."



**Kylen Harvey**, 12, joined the youth group in January. A mere two months later, everything went virtual. Kylen is making the best of it.

"We can put backgrounds on [Zoom] and make them look fun, so people will do that," said Kylen.

What's difficult for Kylen is finding the space and quiet to open up through this virtual platform. "I think it's a little bit harder because I have two dogs and a five-year-old brother, so it's harder for me to talk," said Kylen. "And if I do, I'm getting really shy because there might be some people that I'm not used to seeing in person on there."

While **Ruthie De Leon**, 12, has also appreciated the virtual meetings, she says she's most grateful for the continued opportunities to serve others through the youth group. She was part of the young team that volunteered with Habitat for Humanity a few weeks ago. The job was tough but rewarding.

"We had to wear masks and work gloves, and it was like 90 degrees outside. So we were sweating while we were trying to--and we were outside the whole time we were trying to pick up trash from the yard," said Ruthie. "It was tiring and it was strange... It gave me joy to be able to still do something for the community while we're in this pandemic."

# The Children's Corner

Question: What does it mean to be an **ally**?

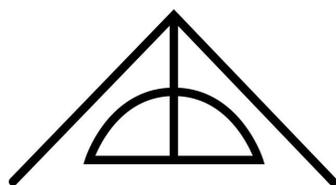
Answer: An ally is a person who helps or stands up for someone who has been bullied or has been the target of prejudice.

## Discussion Questions

- Have you ever been the target of bullying? What happened? How did it make you feel?
- Have you ever been the target of prejudice or discrimination? What happened? How did it make you feel?
- In the situations above, did anyone try to help you or stand up for you?
- Have you ever been an ally to someone who needed it? What did you do to help them?

## How can I be an ally?

1. Learn about other cultures and talk to people who are different from you.
2. If you see someone being left out of the group, ask them to join you!
3. If you see someone being teased for their skin color, their religion, where they're from, or who they like, tell the bully to stop.
4. Talk to a trusted adult when you see prejudice happening around you.



**FRIENDS**  
CONGREGATIONAL  
**CHURCH**  
*United Church of Christ*

Our next issue is coming your way October 30, 2020! If your ministry is holding an event that you would like to see covered in the Fall issue, fill out the Calendar and Publishing Request on our website's calendar page!

Friends Congregational Church, UCC

2200 Southwood Drive  
College Station, TX 77845

office@friends-ucc.org  
979-693-7021

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