

A Letter From the Dean

Dear Members and Friends,

I write on a rainy Sunday afternoon – Hope Church’s livestream service is behind me, we’re waiting for the potatoes to boil for dinner and looking ahead this afternoon to some board games and Zoom chats with family members. I just finalized the canceling of a concert tour this summer to Europe – when I was to be playing in Sweden, Finland, and Germany, and visiting old friends in Bremen. Life seems to delight in contrasts these days - disappointments and thwarted expectations, struggles large and small, against the simple pleasures we can find in connecting with family and friends (often virtually, for better or worse...), the glories of the blossoming spring, and thankfulness for good health.

As I’ve been talking with some of you about how your congregation is adjusting to worship these days, I’ve been struck by another dichotomy. In churches where the organ has always been central to worship, that mostly hasn’t changed, even if how that happens is in flux and looks different in each congregation. However, in congregations with multiple services, where the organist and traditional services have perhaps been treated as second- class citizens, the current situation has only served to heighten that gap. It often has meant that the organ isn’t being heard at all during this time, or all parts of the congregation are now worshipping with the same (contemporary) style. We can all hope for these colleagues that, especially if this reality stretches into months of altered services, their leadership will start to wonder how they could serve all members of their congregation. And if you find yourself in this category, are there ways we can support or help you during this time?

This week, we can enjoy a very complete description of how they’ve been handling worship at Third Reformed the last months, both from a newsletter article Linda Strouf shared with her congregation recently, and a further description she wrote just for us. Thank you, Linda!

I imagine many of you, like me, have been missing live music. Since the world has been on lockdown, the phenomenon of the livestreamed concert has been gaining popularity. While I’m not a huge fan of this format, it certainly does offer us a way to connect through music while so isolated, and for musicians, a new way to perform in front of others virtually.

I heard from Gordon B about Andrea Bocelli’s Easter Day concert, performed live in the cathedral of Milan, Italy. While Bocelli is not necessarily to my everyday musical tastes (I may have been heard calling him cheesy in the past...), Gordon told me this webcast was powerful and moving, and since I trust his opinion, I checked it out. I have to say, even watching after the fact – the livestream apparently drew the largest simultaneous audience for a classical music event ever – I’ll have to agree. This world-famous blind Italian tenor performs in an empty cathedral, accompanied by only the organist, with pictures of the empty streets of Italy and famous major cities around the world. If you need a bit of inspiration this week, look for it on Youtube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huTUOek4LgU>

Also, for some organ music, there is a weekly livestream from the Spreckels municipal organ in Balboa Park in San Diego, CA. Played by their municipal organist, Spaniard Raul Prieto Ramirez, it often includes well-known classical blockbusters, as well as crossover popular music transcriptions. The

concerts also offer fascinating glimpses into the inner workings on this large (outdoor!) instrument, as well as commentary by the organist and others. These are played live on Sundays at 2pm Pacific time, and are available on Youtube sometimes for only one day after the concert, and sometimes longer. Some of you may remember Raul from when he played a Hope College Donia recital a number of years ago in Dimment, and spoke with our chapter for an AGO event – this took place in the old organ studio, so it must have been a few years ago! These concerts can be found at <https://spreckelsorgan.org>.

Rhonda

How Do They Do That? - Excerpt from “Third Church News”, by Linda Strouf, Minister of Music

Many people have been asking me that question in regard to music in our services as we have transitioned into the world of online worship. It's complicated. That's the short answer. The longer answer is that it takes a lot of people, with a lot of different skill sets, to make music for our worship each week. Each week on Tuesday after deciding during worship planning which hymns and songs we will use, I head to church to record just the piano or the organ for each song. You might ask why I'm using the piano more than the organ. It's because when I use the piano I can record a file to a USB stick that then gets uploaded to the great cloud of data in the sky. If I choose to record something on the organ, I have to ask Rob Lunn to meet me at the church and then he records me playing the organ with the setup we have onto his computer and then gives me the data file to upload after he edits it. The organ also has a much more complex sound than the piano, so frankly it is just easier to use the piano. But you should notice that I've been adding more organ accompaniment into the mixture. The ten-minute prelude each week is also recorded by me each week.

Once the file is uploaded, the next person to work on the music is whoever is the cantor (the person who is singing along with the piano/ organ) that week. So far, Janelle Lopez-Koolhaas, Larry Sue, Kate Bolt and Scott Millen have been our cantors. They take the file and practice with it until they are comfortable singing all the words with good diction and in tune. They record themselves singing alone by playing the accompaniment part through their ear buds or headphones. Once they are happy with how they sound, they upload it to our folder in the cloud.

The next person in line is Larry Sue. Larry sang for several weeks to help us get started, and he also went through the learning curve on how to merge the piano and voice part(s) together seamlessly. There is a computer program he uses, and he is also able to do some “tweaking” of the volume or balance and has even been able to add some other instruments on the hymns when I feel like we need something “extra.” When it is done Larry uploads the final product to the cloud and it is ready for the worship service. Each week I also ask someone to do a musical piece for the offertory. They record themselves at home, usually on their mobile phone, and submit their recording. It has been a blessing to reach out to families and younger members of our congregation to provide a short two-minute video that reminds us of the talent that surrounds us, and also reminds us that we give our offerings every week if we meet in person at the church or not. If you think there is someone I should ask, please feel free to email me. It has been a blessing to reach out to families and younger members of our congregation to provide a short two-minute video that reminds us of the talent that surrounds us. At this point, my work for Sunday is done. I leave it in the capable hands of those on our tech crew to put up the right words and play the right song at the right time on Sunday morning. I have to confess it is really hard for me to sit at my computer and not “have control” of the music in worship. God is working on my patience in this time of COVID-19.

There is one more question that I often get asked: “why don’t we sing all the verses?” The answer is that we aren’t in physical community with each other. Singing is a group sport. It just isn’t the same to sing at home by yourself if you are single, or even with your household, especially if you are self-conscious about how you sound. When we sing together in our physical, historic building, we are able to all sing in one voice and with the great cloud of witnesses that have sung before us. I miss that. I bet you do too.

Linda provides more details about Third Reformed Church -

First let me say what a privilege it is to still be “doing” worship and music. Even though nothing is normal and I’m not ready to call this the “new” normal we are able to help one another through the basics of reading scripture, preaching on the word, and music and singing.

What are we doing at TRC? Well I guess I would start with pointing you to the piece (above, Ed.) that I did for the newsletter for our church about how we put the music together for each worship service. From there, let me explain a bit about our process.

We meet as a worship planning team weekly to sort out what is going to go in our services. That isn’t new. What is new is that we have to figure out how to deliver them on the Zoom platform. We decided to use Zoom because of the benefits of being able to SEE each other every week and to also interact with one another at certain points in the service. We are not just broadcasting, but we are in community together. That was really important to us. We have a team of 3 tech people who are working behind the scenes to keep the right things on the screen at the right time, and push play on musical or other recorded events during the service. It’s hard to give up that control. We learned early on that for much of the service it is best to have all participants muted.

Our basic service plan has stayed much the same as when we met in person with a few interesting differences that I will go into more detail here. A bulletin is placed on the church website for people who like to have a clue about what is coming next. Of course no hymnals are necessary nor bibles as it is all projected on the computer screen. We start with a prelude. Since we are supposed to be staying home, I record preludes on a digital piano and then they are played back at the beginning of the service. Hymns are also recorded ahead of time, either on the organ or the piano, and a single cantor overlays the singing verses of each hymn. We aren’t blessed with clergy who have great singing voices, so we have gone out into the congregation to find cantors to sing with the hymns.

Our Call to Worship, Prayer of Confession and other liturgical elements are put on the computer (or tablet or phone) screen for worshippers to follow and in the case of responsive readings say them at home. During these times one pastor will read the leader part and the other will be the congregation. Scripture readings are either read by one of the pastors, or from an individual(s) at home. When we have things from homes we usually pre-record them so there is no worry about a technical glitch of bad internet or connections during the service.

There are two things that have changed drastically in our service, the sermon and the prayers. During the sermon the preacher will give a short (about 10 minute) exposition on the Revised Common Lectionary readings for each week. A worship toolkit is placed on our website each week with questions to provoke thought and response to the message. And that is what happens next...members of the congregation are invited to unmute themselves and respond to the questions or tell a story about how the message relates to their lives. This has been really well received by members of the congregation. A few times when we have predicted that the questions might be tough to answer on the

fly, we planted someone ahead of time with the scripture and message so they would know how to respond to the questions in the worship toolkit.

The second thing that has changed is our prayer time. A prayer is still planned out ahead of time, but there is time left at the end for congregants to unmute and share prayer requests, or if they prefer they may also post their prayer requests in the chat feature to be read by one of our tech team members. This has also been well received and didn't get as overwhelming as I thought it might. It is great to have children requesting prayers for others and themselves.

The final thing that has had mixed reviews (but mostly good) is the time after the closing benediction. I do not play a postlude, but instead we go right into a community time where anyone may speak about anything that is on their mind. A virtual coffee hour if you will. Kids show things they have been making or drawings they made during the sermon. One of our members announced his engagement a few weeks ago. Others complain about how hot it is in Arizona! Another member specifically asked for prayers for an upcoming surgery and then explained what was going to be done. This usually lasts about 20 minutes after the service and I would say that about 2/3 of the congregation stays for this "newsy" time. You are free to leave whenever you must.

For what it is worth, I'm glad we are using Zoom for this interactive worship style. Even though I can now sit in my jammies to "watch" worship if I want to, I look forward to being online, seeing others and being seen. The service is recorded each week and then edited for length and put on our webpage under media. If you would like to see this in action you can pick a Sunday to watch for yourself. I would also say that our services are evolving. While there are common elements of every service, we have given ourselves permission to go outside of the normal TRC box that we find ourselves in each week in the sanctuary.

When will we go back to worship in person? Nobody knows, but we do know that we will continue to use Zoom in the future. There are people tuning into our service who have not been physically in church in a long time. We have any number of visitors with family from many places around the US. We have also had several of our missionaries tune into our services and share what is happening in Pakistan and Mexico. Having a world view of this epidemic has been humbling.

I'd be happy to answer specific questions if anyone would like to know more. Please contact me via email at strouf@hope.edu or by phone 616.396.2664.

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