

Local clergy speaks out about churches during pandemic

By Chris Drost

The COVID-19 regulations for church gatherings have changed repeatedly during the course of the pandemic and local churches have had to adapt continuously along the way to keep serving their local congregations. The Bancroft Times spoke recently with Reverend Lynn Watson of St. Paul's United Church in Bancroft to better understand the situation.

"We are so out of our depth with the technology. What I wouldn't give for a gamer," says Watson. She says "I am not any help" but just worry about content.

During the past year Watson believes they have had really good interaction with their congregation and the community. "We have rung the bell most days and have usually reached 200 people with online posts, and typically 2,000 reached per week." "Some people sit and watch on Sundays, probably around the same number who typically came in person in the past, 50 to 60 people. Some watch the whole thing, while others watch part of it. I am grateful they are patient with us," says Watson. "It is exhausting but one thing about church meetings online is that you don't get those side conversations going on. It makes the meetings go faster," adds Watson. She believes Zoom will be the way of the future. In terms of attending courses, ones that were cost prohibitive because of travel expenses, are now affordable. St. Paul's is not open at the moment. "There is such a divide right now among those who want to get around the restrictions. There are people who have defied orders because they say it is an infringement of their religious freedom. They believe it is the mandate of the church to have people gather and anything that gets in the way is an infringement and sign of persecution," she says. "Some of this division between extremists is coming from the Trump era," Watson explains. Watson says that she is picking up from other religious leaders that Sunday morning isn't working, at least in some geographies. "From what we see on Facebook live, although we are not producing good quality, these are not the regular people attending. They are people looking for hope. They will probably never come on Sundays but that is fine," adds Watson.

"The pandemic has shown us how inside focused we have become. We have witnessed people flaunting public health regulations and saying it is against the church. This means we have lost the focus of what the church is for. It is not about getting together and keep telling ourselves how right we are," says Watson.

"I am aghast at MP Derek Sloan and [MPP] Randy Hillier. I don't get breaking the law just so we can do Sunday mornings the way I think it is. All they are doing is alienating people," she says. Church, according to Watson, is about making connections. "It would be better if we could meet, but we can still connect. I am having some of the most meaningful conversations with people I would probably not have connected with, all because of social media. We actually have a chance to connect with people anywhere in the world. The pandemic is really calling the church to connect with its roots. We have a chance to actually be the church and do what we are supposed to do," says Watson. "Is it spirited and truthful that we insist we worship how and where we always have," she asks. Watson notes that they are reaching a lot of people on social media. "It doesn't have to be one way or the other. It can be both, bricks and mortar and other ways of connecting. Each church has its own mission. It doesn't matter which church. Some people may never darken our doors but need a message of hope." "Things may never get back the way they were but meaningful conversations are happening. Social media is one tool available to connect with each other, something we would have never thought possible."

Because people are not physically coming to the church at the moment, there has been a financial impact. People typically gave when they came to church. "It is out of sight, out of mind," says Watson. St. Paul's is struggling trying to get all the grants it can and chasing around getting information. Sometimes deadlines for a provincial grant come right in the middle of tax season, making things more of a challenge. "The malaise people currently have is taking over and we need to think about different ways of raising funds. It is sometimes hard to get people to do things differently," explains Watson.

In the interim, St. Paul's has not stopped keeping up with its community outreach. Two days per week they hand out grocery cards to those in need and work alongside other organizations such as Bancroft Community Transit, North Hastings Community Trust and North Hastings Community Cupboard. "Maybe we have not been able to give out the same amount but we have continued. When

we ran out of money for food cards an anonymous donor stepped up and provided \$1,200,? says Watson. This week the church committee increased the monthly amount available to purchase the cards thanks to this donation, according to Judy Edgar, church secretary.

Watson believes leadership is making a difference, along with the entire team, in bringing hope to our communities. ?While it is exhausting, we can't stop now. We have to keep going as there is a need for churches to do what they are called to do. I don't think fighting to be able to go to church where you want is where we should be putting our efforts.

?I have never worked harder in my life, never learned more or found new ways of doing things. If you talked to any other ministers, I am sure they would say the same thing. It is not about Sunday morning. Live recordings are great because people can watch them when they can,? concludes Watson.

Donations to St. Paul's are most welcome. Contact the church at 613-332-1900, or email stpaulsunitedchurch@bellnet.ca to arrange an e-transfer. Funds can be directed to the church or specifically to the outreach/food cards.