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Lutheran Church of the Good Shepard in Covid Times

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FOCUS ON LUTHERAN CHURCH OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD IN COVID TIMES



At the entrance of the sanctuary, signs point congregants to the left pews (13 feet social distancing) and the right pews (15 feet social distancing).

The Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Kingston is located minutes from the University of Rhode Island campus. One of only nine Lutheran Churches in Rhode Island, it is home to a tight-knit and committed Congregation of about 80 members.

Dr. Katayoun Alidadi

September 2021

Father Dennis Kohl is clearly proud of the Congregation. In a small Congregation people spend more time talking to each other. Fellowship is a big part of this Congregation's life. We have some retired URI retired professors, engineers, some still working in scientific positions, artists, writers. The average age is early 60. They have a deep commitment. I've never been in a Congregation where people really identified with each other and the Church they grew up in is home for them.

Father Kohl has been the pastor since 2018. Priorly, he was the pastor of the Pilgrim Lutheran Church in Warwick for 25 years.

I was retired but that lasted 3 months. I failed retirement (laughs).

There are some 4 million Lutherans in the United States.

I grew up in Pennsylvania. Lutherans are concentrated in the Midwest, Pennsylvania, Georgia, North Carolina, and Texas, because our forefathers came from Scandinavia and Germany. My family came from Germany. Lutherans in Pennsylvania have a German background, in the Midwest and New England it is mostly Scandinavian backgrounds.

RAINBOW

Good Shepherd was the first Lutheran Church in Rhode Island to become a 'Reconciling in Christ' Congregation in 2005. This means it is intentional about welcoming all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, in the Congregation.

The only reason the rainbow flag isn't up is because it tore and has to be replaced.

We are the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), and we are the most progressive of the Lutherans. We have female pastors, gay and lesbian pastors. I have done weddings for same-gendered people because, well, love is love. Lutherans have a notion of God as gracious. Not many Lutherans will say God is going to get you...who could love a God like that? Forgiveness and grace are so much more part of our lives.



Father Dennis Kohl leads a small but active Congregation located only a few minutes from the University of Rhode Island (URI).

The average worship attendance in a Lutheran Congregation is a third, says **Father Kohl**.

We're a bit better than that. We can't say you will be punished for not going to worship. We don't have that. We are here on worshipping Sunday to, first of all, remind ourselves who God is. Second, who we are and then what God's plans are for us and the whole creation. People may choose not to be part of it, but I can also not make people come on a Sunday morning. But I don't want people to say they did not offer me an opportunity to stay connected. That is what I see our job as being: to create opportunity for people to stay connected.

Pre-pandemic, the Church had only a sound system.

But it was terrible. We also had a website where we posted service times and the monthly newsletter. Now we post our services on there. We invested in a Vimeo cam for live broadcasting.

SPECTATOR SPORTS

The first few months it was more a spectator sport. We were hobbling along doing the best we could. We recorded and posted on our website and Facebook page. Now we are set up for YouTube. We upgraded our internet connection so we can live broadcast on Sunday morning.

Once a month, from June to October 2020, worship was held outside.

We said bring a chair and sit apart. Also bring a hat, to cover yourself from the heat. One Sunday it started raining but I kept going. We will go to outdoor services occasionally because people asked for that. I said that is fine as long as people help with moving the equipment.

In October 2020, services moved indoors, with reservations and social distancing. Temperatures were checked at the door, and information was collected for possible contact tracing. Hand sanitizer was placed at the entrance. The number of attendees was capped at 27 but Pastor Kohl says We didn't turn people away if it was a bit over the limit. Then we figured our air conditioning exchanged air every 4 minutes and we relaxed the number of people we could have.

BREAD

For about a year we went without serving wine. Until February 2021, just bread was given. We do ask to put a mask when people come up to me. And I have a mask on when I give the bread to congregants. I also put on rubber gloves to give the bread, still do. Now we started giving people wine in individual cups if they want it. Before they dipped their bread into wine [where people did not drink from], drank from another cup, and we also offered white grape juice [to dip in].

Pastor Kohl said wine was added, because people have said 'I feel more forgiven when I have the wine' (laughs). That is not what we teach but, all right, we can make this more like the way things used to be as a way forward.

Good Shepherd is taking a cautionary approach. For instance, Father Kohl still wears rubber gloves when handing out the host. After easing up the mask requirement, the Church went back to mandatory masking mid-June 2021. And members are not allowed to sing hymns at worship.

HYMNS

Good Shepherd has a soloist every Sunday instead, but the Congregation misses the singing.

We don't sing hymns anymore; we have cut down on the singing. I'm not sure it's a myth or fact, but we don't because it spreads COVID bacteria more powerfully than just speaking. We will again eventually. If there is one thing people have asked for, it's 'can we please start singing hymns again?' Hymns are an important part of the Lutheran tradition.

We used to put notes in with text and people would know which parts that they sang and which parts I sang as the leader. That's not there anymore. Some people miss that, and I miss that. We're not there yet, to sing hymns even with a mask on. It is the fear of small group of people who are very vocal.

Are congregants on Zoom multitasking?

Hymns aren't just cover music that you put in because you don't want to have silence. For us, hymns serve the purpose of teaching. Hymns are the reinforcement of the sermon. We have a hymn for sending, which talk about our mission when we leave this place and go into the place. Hymns are a teaching part of the liturgy.

VACCINE AS A GIFT

How do the members feel about restrictions on worship?

Some are impatient, and they tell me about their impatience. Some are fearful and they tell me about their fear. I sit between two camps about how we move into the future. The reason why we are doing what we are doing is important. It's not just whimsical. We're not here to give you a hard time. We're here to do what we believe is our due diligence. That is constantly changing.

In my preaching I have talked about being vaccinated as one of the gifts that we can give to our community. We want to look out for others, not just ourselves, there is no reason to not get vaccinated. It doesn't make you magnetic.

We never closed down the Church. However, some Sundays the only people in the Church were our musician, someone recording the service, and myself. We were online for 3 months. And then the weather started to get good so we would have our services outside. People bring their own chairs. Between you and me, it got really hot out there.

—Father Dennis Kohl

We hope you enjoyed learning about religious worship in Rhode Island during the COVID-19 pandemic. Feel free to reach out to Professor Alidadi, principal investigator, at kalidadi@bryant.edu