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9-2021

### Barrington Presbyterian Church Navigating the Pandemic

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#### Recommended Citation

Alidadi, Katayoun and Notley, Pastor Patrick, "Barrington Presbyterian Church Navigating the Pandemic" (2021). *Exhibits*. Paper 6.

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# FOCUS ON BARRINGTON PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH



Sunday worship at Barrington Presbyterian Church takes a hybrid format. Virtual and in-person congregants can see each other during services.

## NAVIGATING THE PANDEMIC



Pastor Patrick Notley in his office, from where he spoke to congregants during the shutdown: "It has to be interactive, not like watching a movie."

**B**arrington Presbyterian Church, a small and vibrant church of about a hundred members, responded to the restrictions of the pandemic by adopting a 'hybrid' model of religious worship. This means that congregants can attend worship in person or via Zoom, and in addition technology is leveraged towards an interactive model. This enables the pastor, in-person and virtual worshippers to interact during worship, thereby creating a hybrid community.

Dr. Katayoun Alidadi

September 2021

Pastor Patrick Notley says he wouldn't wish this on anybody. But there have been some good opportunities within this. It has been a year of learning.

We were here on a Sunday and everything had exploded in the news and it became a consensus; we have to figure this out. So we took a week off, and then the week after we started to have Zoom worship. Initially it was paired down: gathering, prayer, reading scripture, sermon. We didn't have Communion because we hadn't figured that part out. During the next few weeks, we got a YouTube license and started finding hymns that had been prerecorded. There is so much public access out there... We got a bit playful with the music. Are you familiar with Shape note singing?

### THE PANDEMIC AND INCLUSION

Several folks in assisted living got locked down entirely. Their ability to come to worship was sketchy before the pandemic. All of a sudden, their attendance on Zoom was consistent because staff could set them up with an iPad. One couple in Maine also started logging in. We just started noticing folks who typically could not come to worship were now in worship. It extended to a fellowship time after with cameras on.

### GRAPE JUICE

The first months services were all online. We said we have to figure out Communion. We don't have the same restrictions as the Roman Catholics or even Episcopalians have where it has to be fully consecrated with the congregation present and so on. So we just asked to 'get some elements, we will have Communion on Zoom'. I would have the elements here, we would go through all the prayers and then join together in Communion. Historically, in the Presbyterian Church we don't use wine, we use grape juice. One of the first questions afterwards was how many people actually used grape juice'. Many admitted 'not me, I used wine'. That was a funny little thing.

### TRIPOD

In-person services resumed in October 2020.

We told people you are welcome to attend if you are comfortable. We will do social distancing, use masks, our organist was able to come and we invited people not to sing but to vigorously hum. We never had to worry about coming towards the maximum as the largest group was 8 or so. Our sanctuary seats 100, and one of that group was family of 3. So it was fairly easy to spread out. We didn't register or tape off the pews because we just said you guys can figure it out. 6 feet is 6 feet, spread your arms, skip a pew. We blocked off 4 pews in front of pulpit instead of adding plexiglass. That was a learning time. One of the things we found was this can no longer be Zoom only or in person only, we had to do both. We invested a massive amount of money, 30 dollars on Amazon [laughs], to try different microphones and different stands.

Since then, the practical setup has been subject to incremental improvement, with a tripod, a Bluetooth speaker, etc This is an opportunity for us to just try stuff. Let's have some fun with it and figure it out.

#### Are congregants on Zoom multitasking?

No more so than they were in person. I would say people multitasking on Zoom would be doing that anyways. We've had some funny incidents, one person didn't like their angle and were looking at the corner of their room we got a tour of their entire ceiling. Or someone will forget to mute their microphone and they will then start singing.

—Pastor Patrick Notley

The interactive model may not work for other congregations, and it remains rare. To allowing congregants to be comfortable during worship there is no recording of the sessions, so it is all in real time.

### DIGITIZATION AND A NEW REFORMATION

For Walker Rumble, an independent scholar who has been a member for 15 years, this development is significant, on a continuum with the technological advances which spurred the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century.



One change to Communion has been that bread and grape juice are distributed in individual containers.



Walker Rumble at worship in July 2021: "I can say that the pandemic has not damaged my faith at all. My faith remains strong."

The movable-type printing press allowed a printer to produce in a short-length of time hundreds of books, hundreds of Bibles, instead of a scribe monk inscribing one at a time. This put bibles in the hands of a reading public. It's energizing for me to think that in devising a digital way to worship, another response to a profound technological change, I am participating in a second Protestant reformation... maybe... probably.

Walker attends worship every Sunday and considers the communal aspect an extremely important part of church... In Presbyterianism, we think of the church community as a family. Thanks to the pandemic, we are dispersed. Our community has become, at least in part, electronic.

This requires the Church to reinvent what community means when we're not all actually looking each other in the eyes. The Church has turned to technology to allow people who are away from the church to interact with those who are in person in the sanctuary. We have monitors that could help bridge that gap between those in person and remote.

For Barrington Presbyterian Church, the end of the pandemic will not mean the end of the hybrid model. The Church received a gift to build a permanent system with better equipment.

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](mailto:kalidadi@bryant.edu)