

AMERICAN AND FOREIGN CHRISTIAN UNION

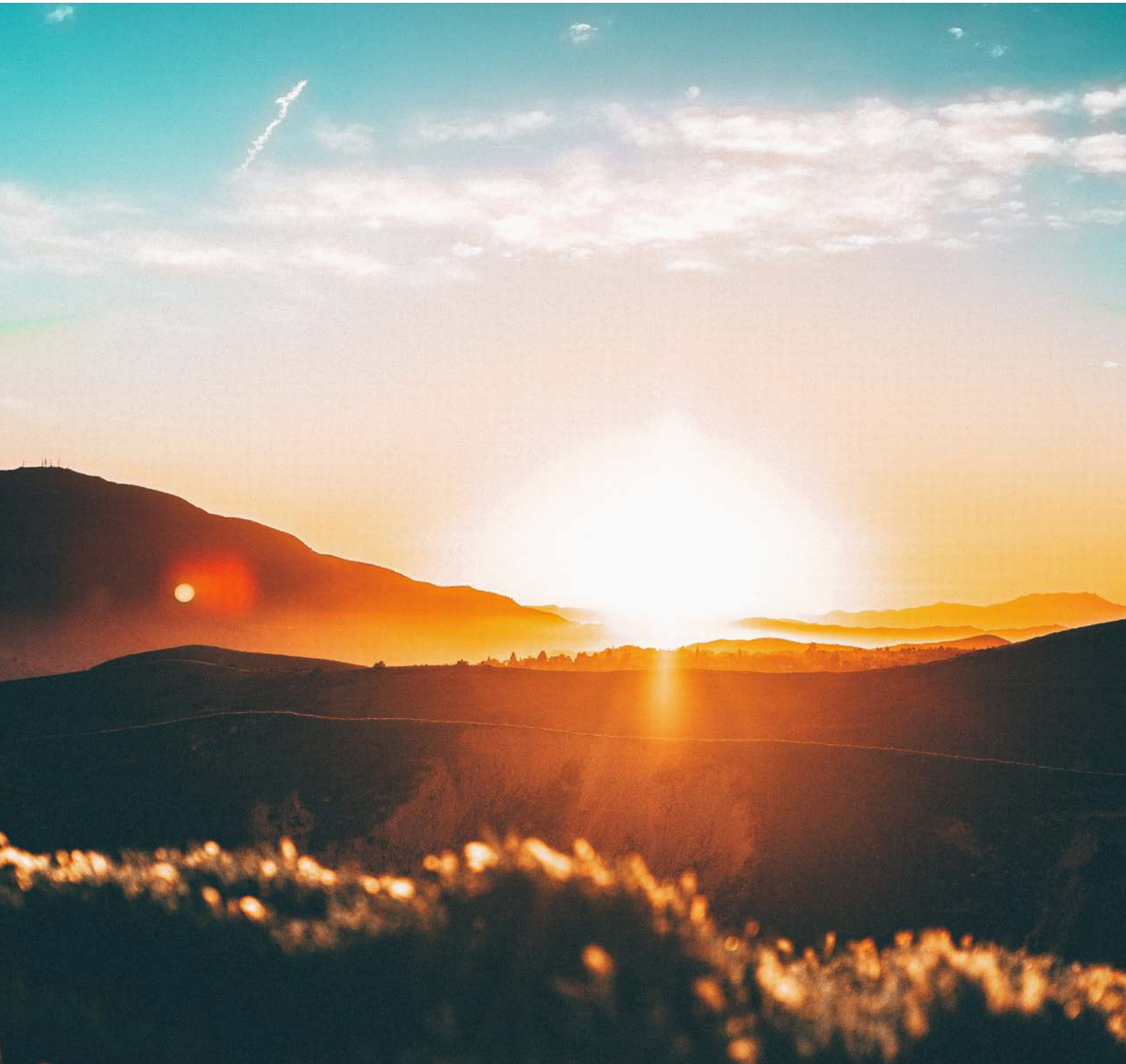
APRIL 2020

The Bridge

Connecting Our Churches and Friends around the World

“Thus it is written, that the Christ
should suffer and rise again
from the dead the third day;
and that repentance for
forgiveness of sins should be
proclaimed to all the nations.”

Luke 46-48



AFCU PRESIDENT'S LETTER



Dear friends in Christ,

Grace and peace to you through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Most of us are confined to our homes and neighborhoods as we wait out the terrible COVID-19 pandemic. Others of us work in healthcare or some other critical field, and if so, are very busy. As an example, I am working hard to commercialize a much-needed surface disinfectant product. Even at that, I work from home.

The pandemic is changing all of our lives and our churches in Europe are seeing the full impact as well. All three churches are now broadcasting their services in some fashion through the Internet as the church buildings are essentially empty due to government regulations. Travel restrictions are also causing significant impact. For example, performing wedding ceremonies for visitors to the American Church in Paris has stopped, eliminating a significant source of income. Again, in Paris, where thousands entered the church building on a regular basis, activity has come to a halt. The ACB and VCC churches face similar issues. Fortunately, God's plans for us and the world don't stop. We can all pray for the churches, provide moral support, and continue to support them financially in this time of great need.

As I mentioned in my last letter the AFCU and ACP search committees had been evaluating candidates for the Interim Senior Pastor position. The Reverend Odette Lockwood-Stewart has been offered and accepted the position. A transition has been planned for July. Likewise, Senior Pastor Scott Herr and his family face the task of moving back to the States. Due to travel restrictions etc. there is much uncertainty as to physically how this will happen, bringing anxiety to all concerned. We pray that this will all work out.

We had scheduled to hold our May 15-16 AFCU board and development meetings in New Jersey. Due to the pandemic we will be using Zoom to hold these meetings since it is currently not possible to do them in person. That said, we will cover all the topics from our normal agenda. With more than 30 participants this should be an interesting exercise.

We must remember that God is in charge and has ultimate control. We pray to him and trust him to hear us. As we now enter Holy Week, we remind ourselves of the great sacrifice that Jesus has made for us by dying on the cross and then most importantly raising from the dead.

Let me close by quoting from Luke 46-48: "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed to all the nations."

Happy Easter!

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "T.E. Ziemann". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Ted Ziemann
President, AFCU

AFCU UPDATE

The American and Foreign Christian Union would like to thank all of those who made donations in support of our ministries during 2019. Your support is valuable to the ministries we serve: The American Church in Paris, the American Church in Berlin, and the Vienna Community Church.

During early 2020 donor statements were mailed to all those for whom we have current addresses. If you made a donation during 2019 and your name does not appear on the list below and/or you have not received a year end giving statement, kindly contact the **Finance Secretary, Russ McNaughton** at afcufinsec@afcubridge.org

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SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS IN SUFFERING TIMES



The current modern secular society which permeates the US and Europe today, communicate the only real world is the “here and now” and we as individuals have the choice to choose the “meaning of life”. Richard Shweder, Anthropologist from the University of Chicago, writes the modern secular culture is the worst culture in the world to handle suffering. He states, “it has no strategy to handle suffering and people have a much more difficult time handling suffering, far more than the shame and honor culture, Hindus, etc.” Secularism pushes back on suffering; it contends we must weep and cry.

The secular approach of psychological methods is based on independent behavior, with significant subjectivity. Because of the individuality of the science, the ideas are biased, leaving you with “the experience that what is real for you may not be real for another person”. In summary, the totality of existence is reduced to this life alone, and life is no longer seen as a means to a greater goal, it can be expected that pleasure is an ultimate pursuit and avoiding pain would be a considerable objective in life.

Historical Christianity addresses suffering “head on”. First, it underscores and presents to you a God who came into this world and suffered. No other religion or worldview asserts anything like this. As recorded, Jesus Christ, experienced unjust suffering through; slander (Jewish Council), betrayal (Judas Iscariot), abandonment (most of his disciples), and murder (Crucifixion). What this means is God is personal. Also, Christ’s sufferings assimilate with others in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), which you can argue relates to us today. One can scarcely think of suffering without considering the story of Job. While it is most often read as a story of individual suffering, it also comprises many features of disaster (loss of life and belongings). These examples are important, not only

because God in His infinite wisdom knows our suffering, but He too humanly experienced it!

Second, it promises a hope and the absence of suffering, through a personal relationship with God in heaven. Again, no other worldview or religion does this. Secularism humanism speaks to no afterlife; Hinduism speaks to an “impersonal” relationship in the cycle of incarnation, and Islam cannot “promise” a loving, peaceful relationship with Allah in the afterlife.

Three, it offers the idea of resurrection. Resurrection is a promise that we will “individually” rise from the dead into a “individual” life of renewal. A life in which there is no more pain, affliction or imperfections. A life which is restored and enjoys an ultimate state of peace, joy and love. This is comparatively different vs. secular humanism or Buddhism/ Hinduism. Secular humanism purports no renewed afterlife, whatsoever. Buddhism/ Hinduism claim a reincarnated cycle of life, potentially resulting in an eventual state of “all soul” bliss.

Lastly, it offers a perfect redemptive solution through a substitute. God has subjected his holy wrath onto this world due to our fallenness (sin). Christianity is the only religion that provides a truthful, redemptive answer. God presented a perfect sacrificial candidate, His Son, through His Son’s willful submission, to assume God’s holy wrath. The only condition of this sacrifice is a personal faith in Him and His redemptive work. **“For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.” (1 Corinthians 15:21-22)**

Brett H. Craig

HERITAGE SOCIETY

The Heritage Society of the AFCU recognizes members and friends of the American Church in Paris, the American Church in Berlin and the Vienna Community Church who have included one or more of these churches in their estate planning. Perhaps you would like to make a significant contribution to help the American and Foreign Christian Union support the commitment it has with the member churches it serves. Endowment funds for each church have been established to help sustain long-term ministry in these churches.

To learn more about the Heritage Society, please visit the AFCU website at AFCUBridge.com and look at The Heritage Society under the Support the AFCU tab.

Also, you may contact the AFCU at AFCUHeritage@AFCUBridge.com.

AMERICAN CHURCH IN PARIS



Dear Members and Friends of the AFCU,

Warm greetings to you from a strangely still and silent Paris. There is Spring in the air here, but also the deadly *Coronavirus*, and as I write this we are three weeks into the curfew and quarantine, with more weeks on the horizon before we are able to roam freely again about the city. French Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer just announced for the first time in history the decision to cancel the national Baccalaureate exam. As one quip put it, "I've given up way more than I intended for Lent this year." In fact, the growing numbers of diseased and dead from this pandemic are sobering and striking fear in many hearts.

As the *American Church in Paris* congregation is observing the required physical distancing imposed by the government, we are socially connecting in new and creative ways using tools like *Zoom*, *Vimeo*, *Youtube*, and *Facebook*. The sanctuary is now a production set. We are posting Monday-Friday video resources: Pastoral Check-in Mondays, Liturgy Tuesdays, Wellness Wednesdays, Taizé Thursdays, and Family Fun Fridays. We also offer online worship services each Sunday. For Holy Week, we will post Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, as well as Easter worship service resources. These video resources are online on our #ACP NOT CANCELLED webpage: <https://www.acpnotcancelled.com>

I've been impressed with how the church has come alive in new ways. Bible studies and teams have continued to meet on line, and because the people on the street and refugees living in tents are still hungry, the sandwich team fed over 500 people in the first two weeks of the curfew! Amazing.

Probably most impressive to me is the phone calling that is happening. Hundreds of phone calls are being made so that all members are being checked on and cared for. We do have a number of members diagnosed with the virus, and so we are staying in touch via phone and email. Finally, along with my Church House mates and colleagues, we are daily gathering for morning prayers in the chapel and using the Anglican morning prayer liturgy to take time for scripture, meditation, and prayer, lifting up not only our community and the city of Paris, but our family and friends around the world.

Richard Lovelace, the famous British pastor and poet, wrote the poem "To Althea, from Prison" in 1642.

*"Stone walls do not a prison make, Nor iron bars a cage;
Minds innocent and quiet take That for an hermitage;
If I have freedom in my love And in my soul am free,
Angels alone, that soar above, Enjoy such liberty."*

I have appreciated these lines reminding us that even though we are temporarily confined and not allowed to "do" church as we normally would, we are absolutely free in spirit to continue to "be" the church for the world. This is a time to recover a deeper and more fervent ministry of prayer and presence for those who are sick and dying, always pointing to the One in whom we have hope for new life. Who knew a simple phone call or prayer could mean so much?

Thank you for remembering us in your prayers, and as I'm telling our congregation, invite as many friends as you like to join us for Easter worship online. We now have *unlimited seating capacity* in our virtual sanctuary! Indeed, this may be the first time you have all of your family and friends from around the world able to join you for worship (online). *All are welcome!*

On behalf of the whole leadership and congregation of the *American Church in Paris*, I wish you all a spiritually deepening Holy Week, and joyful Easter celebration. *"Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!"*

I remain sincerely yours...

In the Name of the One who Died, is Risen, and who Will Come Again!

Scott

AMERICAN CHURCH IN BERLIN



God's grace, peace and love indwell in us all! On behalf of the American Church in Berlin, I extend to you our AFCU colleagues in Vienna and Paris, friends and neighbors the abiding presence of the Spirit in these times of a pandemic named coronavirus.

My perspective of current events will focus on three values – honesty, creativity and flexibility.

Let's go around the room and name how we feel: scared, disoriented, devastated, fragile, stressed, alone, uncertain, on and on. Naming this honestly builds relationship and trust in each other and our leadership. Change is upon us and more is coming. The church will need to adapt to the changing landscape of technology and people's shifting values. It is a time to call forth the "priesthood of all believers," encouraging all to join in our mission of "welcoming, serving, growing and celebrating" by checking in with each other, praying for one another on the phone, sharing highs and lows, delivering groceries and surprises, sharing humor and silliness, being who we are in times of affliction and joy.

The great opportunity of this liminal time is living into a new freedom open to us. Asking questions about who we are and what we value, what used to work for us and what works better now online, trying new things or old things with a twist. It is a wide open time for creativity and experimenting with new ways of being church alive in the world. Our large and growing numbers of young

people at ACB are leading us forward in technology, videoing, zooming, music, interacting with children and connecting intergenerationally. I visit five to ten different congregations online every week, encouraging other leaders to do this so we might learn from others, try different worship experiences and grow in creative ways we could not have imagined or dared to try. Even failing is a learning.

Clearly, the adage "we have never done it this way before" is past and we are free to "see the new thing that God is doing, making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland" (Isaiah 43:19). We all are facing new ventures before us. Are we willing to be flexible, learn new technology skills, allow our children and young people to teach us and lead the way? Consider Abraham and Sarah, Ruth and Naomi, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Joseph, how they travelled to new lands unknown and trusted in God to lead them forward. We get to be bold in imagining the bigger picture of what God is up to today and tomorrow. ACB members are already texting and thanking us for the new things they see and enjoy.

Regarding our current status, starting Sunday, 15 March we have not held gatherings in the church. We are now totally online with our weekly worship service, Holden Evening Prayer Lenten services, daily dwelling in the word reflections, prayer class, prayer requests, bible study, women's and men's support groups and youth/family resources. Council, committee meetings and

AMERICAN CHURCH IN BERLIN

office business meetings are also conducted online. We anticipate continuing with online worship services after we resume live Sunday services. Our weekly BLAST update and monthly newsletter continue online.

ACB members and friends are connected with one another through phone calls, a list of members 60 and over considered most vulnerable and Facebook online prayer requests. Our deacon Kumar Vasanth is managing our prayer initiatives. Each week I offer prayers for every person in our directory, guests, and the many loved ones our members have lost.

While Laib und Seele (food and soul), our weekly food distribution program is temporarily discontinued, we are opening our food pantry for distribution the week after Easter.

With regard to financials, our monthly bank transfers are holding steady while our loose plate (cash) and facility usage income are down by 2,500-3,000euros/month. We encourage our cash donors to switch to bank transfers but there will likely continue to be a shortfall.

Our ACB staff of 2-1/2 positions has been reduced, with the loss of our full time intern Rachel Johnson, to 1-1/2. As a result of this staff reduction we are trying to be more aware of healthy boundaries and increasing self care. Our office technology is not set up to work remotely. We find ourselves stretched because the usual volunteers and tech assistants cannot come to the office for administrative work.

Regarding our future state, we do not envision ourselves returning to what was, rather what God is up to in the present, in the now, and in God's preferred future. It is unknown as to when the church will be open for services and the office open to the wider community. It feels safe to be here in Germany where the health system is managing this crisis as well as can be expected and so far no one in our church community that we know of has been found to be positive with the virus.

We don't yet have a plan to address the shortfall of income and the reduction in our staff. We've been in this situation for less than a month and hope to be creative about our needs and our ability to serve our congregation and neighbors in the coming months. We have a sense of urgency among a large young population that is less wealthy and includes many students and young professionals, refugees and asylum seekers.

We have simplified our online worship services with people leading worship from their homes instead of coming to our church building, being mindful of social distancing requirements. We held an online healing service which creatively manifested quiet time and a time of healing and prayer. We are planning an ecumenical Easter service that will include greetings from five religious leaders including Muslim and Jewish faith leaders, an Aramaic speaker and two representatives of the German church.

All of us will experience a Holy Week and Easter which we will never forget. God is at work in all this change, gracing, gifting and blessing us with new life and resurrection in the midst of suffering and even death. Love always arises!

We extend Holy Week and Easter blessings to you all as together we serve up the courage to encourage, comfort and support one another in not being afraid, being a well of courage to discover again Christ within us, for us and alive in the world!

*Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours, no feet but yours,
Yours are the eyes through which Christ's
compassion is to look out to the world.
Yours are the feet with which Christ is to go
about doing good.
Yours are the hands with which Christ is to
bless all people now.*

Teresa of Avila

Rev. Dr. Mari Thorkelson
American Church in Berlin

VIENNA COMMUNITY CHURCH



LOVE IN THE TIME OF THE CORONA VIRUS

Rev. Dr. Neil Parker
Interim Pastor, Vienna Community Church
pastor@viennacommunitychurch.com

Well, due to the Corona virus, I'm stuck at home. A lot. My wife works from home, so now she's even more stuck with me. Stuck at home, I've had time to go through my shelves. I moved to Vienna just six months ago, and while I sort-of unpacked, the books were just tossed on the shelves. The Art of Ductigami (making things from duct tape) is right next to Elie Wiesel on one side, and Pilgrim at Tinker Creek on the other. It's time to sort them.

And you know what happens when you sort books, right? You pick one up, weigh it in your hands. Is this important? Should it be close to my desk, my reading chair, or beside the bed? Should I read it again, now? Did I ever read it?

While doing that exercise, I ran across some of the classics of Christian spirituality. Richard Foster's Celebration of Discipline, for instance, with its chapter on "the recreating stillness of solitude". The Desert Fathers, by Helen Waddell, who sets the writing of the hermits in the context of the upheavals of the 4th Century, when civilization seemed to crumble and Christianity was faced with the peril of respectability. Annie Dillard, whose writings epitomize the importance of mindfulness and experiencing the divine in the most ordinary and accessible of places and events. I am rediscovering the spirituality of social distance.

The blessedness of being alone

Of course, we know (or we are learning again) that even when we are not seated in silence beside other Christians on wooden benches in a large Gothic-style building made of stone, we do not need to be physically co-located to be in communion. We remain linked; even when we think we pray alone, we are always surrounded by 'angels and archangels and all the company of heaven' in that 'unseen cloud of witnesses' which encompasses us.

We are learning that if we have, unfortunately, separated our religious lives (Sunday morning, in a church) from our daily lives (Monday to Saturday, in the office or the school or the coffee shop or the arena) that now is the time to discover that there is not just one sweet hour of prayer per week.

We either find our spirituality in the midst of what we do in our own homes, or we fail.

Being together isn't everything

Christians have worshipped in solitary confinement, in desert caves, in intensive care units, in catacombs, and under threat of persecution. We dare not believe that our usual ways of gathering are the only ways blessed by God.

Even so, we are doing what we can to stay together

— **We have been providing online worship**, a combination of regular worship and home prayer. We're trying to marshal the talents of those of our community: Scriptures are being read by members of the congregation, as they always have been. Music is being shared through audio clips. We are hoping to create a virtual choir (yes, there are technical difficulties). An ecumenical Good Friday service will be shared through Zoom.

VIENNA COMMUNITY CHURCH

OUR CORE MESSAGES

Each Sunday, you will find opportunities to worship individually, with your family, or with small groups. Although we are physically separated from one another, we are united in prayer and praise.

Technology can be a gift, but it is also a challenge. Let us be mindful of *technolatriy*, the worship of and over-reliance on technology. Roman roads enabled the spread of the Gospel; the printing press enabled the Protestant Reformation, and the internet enables us to connect in new ways. But technology has never been the Saviour.

Scriptures about the valley of dry bones, about the dead coming to life, and about not being afraid, are deeply relevant. So is Easter. We can praise God without being in the same room – God's people have always done that.

If something like this is enough to threaten our survival, our faith wasn't worth much.

We will take care of one another, and we will not be afraid.

——— **Our prayer circle is more active.** "Ministry to Shut-ins" didn't use to be the cutting edge of our work. Now, that means ministry to all. There are phone networks, and prayers are being shared on a Living Prayer Page. QR Code

——— **We pass (electronic) note to one another; we bang on (figurative) pipes.** We are finding ways to communicate with each other, although we are aware that it is easy to forget some of church members, the ones who are on the edge and that we don't easily call to mind.

——— **We are lighting a Sabbath candle,** Friday nights, as a vigil for those who are ill, and those who have died. Psalm 91 is our go-to psalm.

——— **We are impacted globally,** as almost all of our congregation members have another part of the world to which they are intimately connected. So we are praying not just for our neighbours, and not just for the people we like to see in church, but for the vast network of God's people.

——— **We have opportunity for more Bible Study.** While this is not part of my mandate as interim minister, sermon preparation is. I am now writing my sermons (breaking with a forty-year-long practice) and it allows me to add information to encourage deeper exploration into the Scriptures. There's a reason why ministers have books! So, for instance, instead of just mentioning the pool of Siloam, I provide a link to further information online.

——— **Holy Week will continue to be holy.** We will share in the Procession of the Palms this Sunday, invite one another to share in communion on Maundy Thursday, be part of an ecumenical Zoom celebration of Good Friday, and celebrate the resurrection on Easter Sunday, physically apart and spiritually together.

——— **We were blessed to have had a congregational retreat,** attended by about two-thirds of our congregation, at which we looked at different prayer styles (following old standards such as "Prayer and Temperament" by Michael and Norrissey: <https://www.amazon.com/Prayer-Temperament-Different-Forms-Personality/dp/0940136023>).

We included liturgical movement, chanting, breathing exercises such as Tai Chi and yoga, and celebrated different styles of bible study. So we're building on that, and using this as an opportunity to affirm and strengthen other ways of faithful Christian vocation and discipleship.

For me, personally:

——— My son, a teacher in China, was visiting us when the borders started to close at the beginning of March. He continues to live here in Vienna, teaching his students online.

——— My denomination, in Canada, does not have an overseas network. Regional gatherings were just something I was used to giving up. Suddenly, everybody is linking from a distance. I feel like Rumi's lame goat: "You've seen a herd of goats going down to the water. The lame and dreamy goat brings up the rear. They are worried faces about that one, but now they're laughing, because look, as they return, that one is leading!"

Our finances

Mickela Moore, Moderator, Vienna Community Church

The VCC is fortunate in that it is not carrying large financial responsibilities at the present time. Naturally, not having services has affected the finances of the Church as some only give in the offering plate and, of course, the VCC does not have the additional income from guests and visitors. To that end, efforts are being made to encourage people who would normally give in the offering plate to transfer their offerings online. As a church, it was decided that the VCC should continue to pay remuneration for those supporting the weekly worship service and fellowship hour. What has been heartening is that the crisis has also triggered a desire by members to support those in the congregation who might be struggling because of job loss and/or do not have access to unemployment benefits in Austria or qualify for the generous support provided to employees or business owners by the Austrian Government during the Covid 19 crisis. To that end, a Special Assistance Fund has been set up to serve as a possible source of support. When the crisis is over, the fundraising efforts that were being planned will be resumed.

FINANCE UPDATE

AFCU PROVIDES SUPPORT

The American Church in Paris (ACP), The American Church in Berlin (ACB) and the Vienna Community Church (VCC) are ministering to a diverse population spiritually, culturally and economically. The American & Foreign Christian Union, established in 1848, provides Board guidance and economic support to American and International Christian churches, and is thankful for our current partnerships!

We welcome supporters who want to impact the world through these vibrant ministries. If interested, join us by following the giving instructions below.

The AFCU is an IRS classified 501(c)(3) organization supporting the English-speaking ministries of the ACP, ACB and VCC. Your donations are tax deductible for US tax purposes.

Your gifts are important and appreciated and you can support the International Christian Community by sending your checks to our address shown below.

TO DONATE ONLINE

An alternative gifting option is to donate through the AFCU web site using your credit card or PayPal account. The AFCU web site address is afcubridge.org. Go to the web site and click on DONATE.

TO DONATE VIA CHECK

1. When gifting by check, please designate your donation to one of these ministries, as follows:

American Church in Paris
American Church in Berlin
Vienna Community Church
AFCU General Fund

2. Make the check payable to the AFCU, and include the church designation, noted above. Mail to:

AFCU Treasurer
2885 Sanford Ave. SW # 29934
Grandville, MI 49418

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