

June 15, 2020

Warm Greetings, Wausau First UMC!

I've been joining you in watching your worship services on YouTube. Actually, the verb "watching" worship is neither accurate nor ultimately acceptable. When it comes to worship, our desire is to participate together, each adding our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness to build up one another and work together to love and serve our community and world for God's glory. Though it is easy to slip into merely "watching" worship - especially when it's online - God has given us new opportunities to be creative in participating together even when we can't do it in the ways we've been used to.

I admit that I had my doubts that online worship could ever be truly engaging. Before COVID-19 hit, it seemed like a nice-but-not-necessary ministry for large, younger congregations that could attract and afford the staff and technology to run it well. Despite my misgivings I have discovered that online worship and ministry is something that is worth continuing, improving, and strengthening even after we can safely come together in our building.

For several years now, the front door to a church has not been physical but virtual. People who are looking for a church are first watching online to see if the worship connects to their minds and hearts. Current research is showing that online worship has more power to connect to both existing members and reach out to new people than we thought possible. Studies are revealing an unexpected benefit of online ministry is that people are actually much more open to sharing and asking questions of faith when they can be doing it from the safety of their home. This is counteracting the problems of online bullying and "trolling". God is turning that evil around and using online worship to redeem lives with hope and healing.

We still have a lot to learn in how to engage more effectively with people in online ministry. At New Hope (my current church), we have been doing services via Facebook Live that can also be accessed through our website in real time and anytime for people who aren't on Facebook. It is not polished, professional, or pricey. It involves wheeling our tea cart in the middle of our living room, setting a portable standing desk on top of the cart for necessary height, and trying to strategically place my laptop so people can see the slides with the prayers, song lyrics, Scripture passages, images, and quotes to help get the message across. Our kids take turns forwarding slides, reading the scriptures and comments that come in during the service, and using my iPhone as a video camera. My husband helps by playing bass or guitar, and I pivot on a bench between playing piano, preaching, and praying.

The fact that many of our flaws are in full view and unable to be edited out is humbling indeed. I have feared that my chipped front tooth, unintended or forgotten words or chords, quarantine weight gain, and occasional side-ways videos have been

distractions from people being able to focus on fully engaging in worship. Though these distractions are probably an issue for some people, I've been grateful to hear how many people find it reassuring to witness the reality that we all have our struggles and weaknesses that are all fully met by God's grace. Hopefully this helps people participate in worship by giving permission to be more open and vulnerable with one another so we can experience God's healing work in our souls and communities.

This coming Sunday, June 21, will be my last service at New Hope before we move to Wausau on June 25-26. I invite First UMC and New Hope to have a joint online worship service on **June 21 at 9:30am** so we can experience another facet of being what John Wesley called a "connectional church" together. It is the last in a series called **CommUnity: The Nature, Nurture, and Need for Church**. New Hope and Wausau First are very different congregations, so the songs and general "vibe" may be new to you. We do not use bulletins at New Hope because the scriptures, unison prayers, and song lyrics are displayed on the screen. It is easier to see if you join us on a laptop or tablet instead of a phone. If you are unable to join us live at 9:30, you will still be able to watch it anytime later either on New Hope's website or Facebook page.

Join us either here: <https://www.facebook.com/NewHopeChurchofDePere>

or here: www.newhopedepere.com

I have chosen three of New Hope's favorite songs for my last Sunday with them. You can see and hear the professional versions of them at these links if you would like to familiarize yourself with the music and lyrics in advance:

"Greater" by Mercy Me - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXI0B4iMLuU>

"All the People Said Amen" by Matt Maher <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KG04jJuMCGY>

"Old Church Choir" by Zach Williams - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-cRh8NqmXoE>

Together in Christ,

Pastor Rebecca