

REFLECTIONS ALONG THE WAY

Dear friends,

Sometimes it seems as if the COVID-19 pandemic is over. Fans crowd into the stands of every Steelers game. The symphony is back at Heinz Hall, and the curtain goes up soon at the Benedum Center. Children fill yellow buses each morning, heading to face-to-face classes again at last. We may continue to wear masks; we may reach for the hand sanitizer more often; but still: we are together and healthy again.

But in hospitals across our region, the pandemic is still a daily, brutal reality. The autumn COVID surge is filling beds and packing emergency rooms. In several counties of our region, over 80 percent of intensive care beds are in use. Some hospitals, such as UPMC Children's in Pittsburgh, have even erected triage tents in their parking lots.



While most of us return to a normal-feeling fall, our region's medical workers, from doctors and nurses to respiratory therapists and custodial workers, face circumstances that are not normal at all. Risking their own wellbeing, they labor long hours in challenging conditions, surrounded by an illness that ravages every bodily system and devastates formerly-healthy people.

Among these workers are men and women charged with providing for the spiritual needs of people of all faith traditions, and carrying the good news of the Gospel to the hospitals' Christians: our professional chaplains. For over eighteen months, these steadfast servants have kept vigil at bedsides with the dying. They have set up FaceTime calls to share last words with loved ones, and provided comfort to family members in times of deepest grief. They have coped with their own anger and frustration at the preventable illnesses that could have been avoided with a simple vaccination. They have faced abuse from visitors who sneer about the need for masks and other precautions. Their hearts have broken again and again, as they attend the deaths of young parents and beloved elders.

As you are reading this, I invite you to pause, to set this newsletter down, and to pray, in whatever words your tradition suggests, for all our chaplains. Pray for their strength and courage. Pray for their continued compassion and their sustained faith. Pray for their health and for their families. *Stop and pray for them now.*

Welcome back. Now that you have done that, I invite you to go one step farther. If you know any of our chaplains personally, I hope you will pick up your phone now and send them a friendly text. If not, send a note of encouragement to your local hospital addressed to the Department of Spiritual Care. Or, you might organize or participate in a visible act of public support. In Butler, for example, the Butler Clergy Network organized a Ring of Light: community members holding flashlights gathered in a circle around Butler Memorial Hospital, offering a virtual embrace for the people within.

In the years to come, when I look back on these pandemic months, I expect I'll remember them as a time of anxiety and uncertainty, but also as a quiet and sweet time: more time with my family, fewer hours in the car running from place to place. But not everyone has experienced the pandemic that way. All of us who have been privileged enough to sit at a distance from the worst impacts of this period must step up to support those who have borne its deepest traumas. And of course, we must also do all we can, though the promotion of continued health precautions, to lighten to the burden on our hospitals and the dedicated children of God who work within them.

Your sister in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Liddy".

The Rev. Liddy Barlow
Executive Minister
Christian Associates of Southwest PA



Photo courtesy of Butler Radio Network

Participants in the Butler Clergy Network's "Ring of Light" lifted their small candles aloft to show support outside the hospital.