

Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania

Serving 10 Counties, 28 Church Bodies, 2,000 Congregations and 1,000,000 Christian Members

The Call . . .

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Pittsburgh Theological Seminary
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to be one in Christ



April-May 2020, Number 2

A Unifying Voice in the Name of Jesus Christ for the Mission of the Gospel and the Wholeness of Communities

Churches Respond to Coronavirus Pandemic with Creativity, Compassion

When you received the last edition of *The Call*, COVID-19, the severe respiratory disease caused by the novel coronavirus, was a distant news story. But then came March.

The viral outbreak, now a global pandemic, came to Southwest Pennsylvania. Our regular ways of worship, pastoral care, and service have ceased. Special events, from Holy Week and Easter liturgies to Christian Associates' 50th anniversary Jubilee Celebration, have been canceled or postponed. Members of our churches have fallen ill, and even died.

To help congregations respond to the pandemic, Christian Associates built a comprehensive directory of resources on our website, www.casp.org/covid19. The web site brings together reliable public health information, statements from church leaders, tips for creating online worship experiences, and resources for prayer, theology, pastoral care, and children's ministries.

Additionally, Christian Associates' Council of Bishops and Judicatory Executives wrote to our region's public officials offering the resources of the church – our prayers, our volunteers, our buildings – to help our communities (www.casp.org/pandemicletter). Many congregations have risen to this challenge, distributing food and caring for lonely neighbors.

In late March, the federal government passed several pieces of legislation responding to the crisis that directly impact congregations and faith-related organizations. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act requires employers, including churches, to provide paid sick leave and family leave for employees affected by Covid-19; employers receive payroll tax credits to pay for this benefit. The CARES Act provides forgivable loans to employers, including non-profits and churches, to cover payroll, rent or mortgage, and utilities for two months. For further information, refer to your



Each Sunday morning, Rev. Liddy Barlow has taken "virtual circuit rides", visiting online worship services (like those above). You can follow her journey on our Facebook page, www.facebook.com/christianassociatesswpa.

judicatory, or ask for a Payroll Protection Loan application from your bank or another SBA lender.

Like worship, opportunities for interfaith education and dialogue have moved online as well. In April, Christian Associates and the Center for Loving Kindness at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh will debut *Sofa Spirituality*, a series of video interviews and small-group online discussions. The videos feature local and

national spiritual leaders sharing an aspect of their faith tradition that holds special meaning in this time of pandemic. After viewing each video, viewers can sign up for a facilitated online discussion group.

Building connection, fostering hope, deepening understanding: we can pursue these goals even in the midst of pandemic. Together, let's pray for one another, for our neediest neighbors, and for our whole world at this uniquely challenging time.

Ecumenical Events Postponed

The pandemic has required rescheduling many planned ecumenical events, including Christian Associates' 50th anniversary Jubilee Celebration. Watch for a new date for the Celebration, which will feature musical ensembles from throughout the region and the debut of the winning hymn in our hymn contest: "In Christ the Church is Ever One" by the Rev. Dr. John Dalles of Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh.

The Pittsburgh Pastoral Care Conference and the Bread for the World Hunger Advocacy Workshop will also be rescheduled; we'll hope to announce new dates in the June edition of *The Call*.

REFLECTIONS ALONG THE WAY

Dear friends,

For everything there is a season, we read in Ecclesiastes. The familiar litany continues: *a time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted.*

Until recently, I confess I'd never given much thought to that second couplet. If you'd asked me, I would probably have guessed that "pluck up what is planted" referred to harvest time: filling baskets with ripe fruit and bringing grain into our barns.

But this spring, I've discovered that isn't what the verse means at all.

I spend a lot of time planting. You probably do too: hours in meetings and conversations, sending emails and crafting agendas, planning out future projects and programs. Events like Christian Associates' 50th anniversary Jubilee Celebration are months in the making and years in the dreaming; the soil is tilled carefully long before the big day arrives.

We may have justifiable fear about the effect this pandemic will have on our communities, but we can still celebrate the ways God's providence always suffices, even in challenging times.

When the urgency to defend against COVID-19 became clear, though, all that planting seemed far less important than the necessity of protecting our neighbors. The most responsible, caring, and faithful choice was setting all our plans aside. On March 12, I sat in my office making phone calls and sending emails, crossing out one event after another from my spring calendar, until pages of empty days stared back at me. It was time to pluck up what is planted.

Indeed, in looking more carefully at this verse, I discovered that the verb for "pluck up" does not mean "harvest" at all – it's more like "to uproot" or "to weed." There are times for fruitful, productive activity, the Bible seems to say. And then there are times for ripping that work out, for taking what was growing and casting it aside altogether.

What do we have left when we pluck up what was planted? It looks like nothing, at first. Just barren ground. Stirred-up dirt. A fallow field.

Oddly enough, a fallow field might be a very appropriate way for Christian Associates to celebrate our fiftieth anniversary. Hear what the book of Leviticus says about this milestone year:

That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces.

Jubilee, after all, was a Sabbath time. Its purpose was not frenetic activity, a packed calendar, one perfect event after another. Jubilee was a time of rest for the people and rest for the planet. It was a time to discover that even when the people do not plant, the field itself produces. A time to *consider the ravens*: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them.



Perhaps this strange season is calling us into a very different time of Jubilee. We may not be able to gather in person, but we can love one another from afar: through mail, by phone, online. We may have justifiable fear about the effect this pandemic will have on our communities, but we can still celebrate the ways God's providence always suffices, even in challenging times. We may no longer have a parade of events to attend, but that means we have more time to pray, in lament and in thanksgiving.

Our calendar may be empty, but with hope and gratitude, our hearts are full. Praying for your continued good health and strong faith.

Your sister in Christ,

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

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

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TOGETHER WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT

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How is God calling us to broaden our pastoral imagination in these difficult times?

It's a time to slow down in solitude, to pray and engage spiritual practices that help us be less anxious and more wise. In these extraordinary times, our concern for the well-being of our neighbors supersedes all else, including our programming.

Please stay in touch! As we wait for this storm to pass, we are planning our new classes. Visit our website, and be sure to sign up for our Continuing Education Newsletter for updates.



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Christian Associates Invites Contributions for Anniversary Book



As part of our 50th anniversary celebrations, Christian Associates is publishing a special edition in *The Word in Our Voices* series: *All One in Christ Jesus: Southwest Pennsylvania Celebrates Christian Unity.*

This book will include sermons, essays, and hymns, and other original writing on the topic of Christian unity by preachers throughout our region. It will also include personal reflections about Christian Associates' first half-century. ***The volume will be available in print and online in September 2020.***

We invite your writing for consideration in this collection. All submissions should be emailed to lbarlow@casp.org. If submitting a sermon, be sure to note when and where it was preached; audio submissions are welcome.

To accompany the volume, we will prepare a study and conversation guide for congregational use. Your church can plan now to offer one or more classes this fall exploring the unity of the church and our regional efforts to bring it to life.

The earlier volumes in *The Word in Our Voices* series are available for free download by visiting www.casp.org/sermons. Print copies may be purchased by calling our office, once the stay-at-home order is lifted.

Events Move Online

Several ecumenical events will take place in a virtual format this spring.

Byzantine Theological Seminary's annual *Sts. Cyril & Methodius Lecture* will take place via livestream on **Thursday, May 7 at 7 p.m.** The Very Rev. Dr. John Behr of St. Vladimir's Seminary will speak on "The Gospel of St. John as a Paschal Gospel." Registration and streaming details will be available at www.bcs.edu/2020/02/06/20th-annual-lecture/.

The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival had planned a visit to Butler and Pittsburgh in April and a national march on Washington in June. Instead, they plan a virtual march: the largest on-line gathering of poor and impacted people, and people of conscience, in this nation's history. To learn more and register, visit www.june2020.org.

