

PANDEMIC YEAR IN REVIEW

In mid-March 2020, St. John's was just about to launch the rector search when COVID-19 surged, closing down much of Massachusetts.

We turned briskly from holding two in-person Sunday services to climbing the learning curve of Facebook livestreaming for one Sunday service. Technical challenges made our first efforts uneven, but we learned, and now our Facebook services run smoothly and are enjoyed by people in our local region and from afar (even the Midwest and Canada).

The coronavirus put a hold on our in-person meetings and worship, and staff began to work remotely. However, **St. John's campus has not been sitting**

empty and inactive during this year. Our partnership with MANNA Soup Kitchen (mannanorthampton.org) has grown as pandemic-related food insecurity grew. In 2020, MANNA tripled the number of meals served by providing to-go meals for our guests. In early February 2021, MANNA was able to open a warming center in the lower level of parish hall to allow our unhoused neighbors a place for a bit of rest and comfort from the cold because the public library and city hall are not available due to the pandemic.

By early fall 2020, MANNA and St. John's had **erected a tent on the lawn** and MANNA guests had a place to enjoy their meals al fresco. When approval came for outdoor services, we were able to gather on Sundays for socially distant, limited attendance services of Holy Eucharist. Communion wafers were distributed with long chef's tweezers, a new and essential liturgical accessory for pandemics. The tent allowed youth group and Godly Play classes to meet as well. We continued to adapt throughout the fall, including moving into the sanctuary for a short period until the next surge occurred and we returned to all-virtual formats.

Currently, our Sunday Holy Eucharist service is pre-recorded, with off-site readers, organ music, and offerings by a soloist, and then posted on our Facebook page. A **Zoom Morning Prayer** service began in Advent, incorporating Lambeth/African Bible study and has been so successful that it continues. Taizé Prayer continues on Facebook live once per month, and Compline by Zoom on select weekday evenings has been added. Each of these services has a strong following in and beyond our congregation: Morning Prayer includes former parishioners in the very north of Canada and Florida snowbirds, as well as housebound parishioners, some young adult newcomers, and occasionally families with children. The children's contributions to Bible study can be profound and are welcomed joyfully.

In the last year **we have upped our small group game**. Programs for families, children, and teens have moved online in accessible modules and for Zoom gatherings. Our afternoon Christmas Eve service featured virtually every family in recorded portions and still receives acclaim. Existing groups have blossomed: the Social Justice group is co-led by our priest associate from Shanghai; Lectio Divina has found its way on Zoom, even for the elderly participants; Men's Bible Study has, after ten years, expanded its membership to all and has revised its format to take advantage of the talents of members of the group, who include members of other denominations including a Seventh Day Adventist pastor who found it by working with St. John's in the refugee Circle of Care.



New groups have formed, including a book group that started as a single book study and has **enthusiastically continued** with additional books as the Growing Edge Book Group. Fourteen participants are currently engaged in the Episcopal Church's Sacred Ground Race and Faith program, deepening our understanding of systemic racism in our history and institutions. It has been a transformative experience, leading the original members to continue as an action group, and a commitment to offer Sacred Ground again for more parishioners. An interfaith group of persons from all over the country (and beyond) are studying the Gospel of Mark and reading Michael Casey over the entire church year.

Formation for children and youth has been a challenge during the pandemic. Our children and youth have been attending school mostly virtually for almost a year. That makes additional screen time for church school unappealing to young people and their parents. The Director of Formation, Olivia Leone, has created videotaped Godly Play lessons, home activity packets for the various liturgical seasons, and outdoor story trails on the St. John's campus. These **diverse and creative options** have been well received, but the children and youth and their teachers miss their weekly classes together in person and are eager to be able to gather again.

The Vestry's goals for 2021 include continuing to develop these activities, including continuing to **livestream worship once we reconvene** in the sanctuary. We will continue to deepen and expand our antiracism work and our commitment to social and racial justice. In our new meeting and classroom facilities, we will resuscitate our in-person formation with children, teens, seekers, and adults.

Another goal is to respond to the "rough year" we have experienced by continuing to reach out to parishioners and to reintegrate people back into in-person church life, including some newcomers who have joined us in 2020. Our biggest goal for 2020 was to strengthen connections and to be **even more radically welcoming**, and we have renewed that commitment for 2021.

Of utmost importance for 2021 is the search for the new Rector of St. John's. Our interim period, with a devoted, highly respected, creative, and disciplined Interim Rector, has served us well. Our finances are in order, our protocols are documented, the roles of our staff are clear, and the congregation is strong and enthusiastic.

We look forward to welcoming our next rector to ministry with us.

[*Click here to read our Pre-Pandemic Parish Profile.*](#)