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### RS 301 Oral History: Interview with Grace Cunningham

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Tiffany Douglas, RS 301: Religion in America

Community Partner: Grace Cunningham (Christian)

Grace Cunningham is a student at HSU, president of the HSU-affiliated Solid Rock youth group, and is in charge of the slideshow and livestream during the Sunday services at Arcata First Baptist. Grace first joined Solid Rock and Arcata First Baptist Church during her freshman year at HSU, two years ago. Since then, she has found a huge sense of belonging within the church community and especially within Solid Rock.

Before the pandemic in early March of 2020, a normal week of fellowship activities for Grace looked like going to multiple Bible study groups on weeknights and hanging out with Solid Rock friends at the church on the weekend. On Sunday morning, she would “get up early, head on over to the church school to meet up with Solid Rock for a pancake breakfast before the service. Then on Sunday evenings, there would be a big dinner at the pastor’s house.” A normal service included mingling indoors and sitting closely with friends in the pews. One of the most important aspects of this community for Grace was being given a small safe space to talk about the Bible and teachings with other people and getting to hear different perspectives from her peers.

After the pandemic was announced and Humboldt County began to shut down, Grace’s worship experience drastically changed. At first, the Sunday services were pre-recorded by the pastor. Solid Rock continued on Zoom for the first couple months. Then Grace explained that “Last fall, church services switched back to in-person, but were held outside in the church parking lot with masks on until the weather got cold. Since then, we have operated inside with

masks on and six feet apart.” Grace is hoping that as the weather gets better this spring, services will be held outside again. Regarding the change to her personal practice, not being able to go to church was unmotivating for Grace. She spent time looking up sermons and messages online, but it just wasn’t as personal.

There have been quite a few challenges in the last year for her. After discussing that it was “hard to understand the Bible when I really wanted someone else’s input on the same passage,” she explained that it was also difficult to have the same closeness and understanding of what she is reading without having church friends to bounce ideas off. Grace expressed feeling frustrated and finding the motivation to dig deeper and do research was difficult. When services and activities were online, there were many technical difficulties including lagging service music and talking over each other. Grace described attending these Zoom meetings as “seeing the same faces, but it just wasn’t the same.” She also has missed the balance of school, homelife, and church. At home, she lives with family members who are atheists, so it can be hard to crack open a Bible on the couch without a debate on religion. Since Solid Rock and church service have commenced in person again, these stressors have eased.

Arcata First Baptist Church adapted quickly to CDC guidelines. Once services were in person again, masks were required and CDC precautions were taken. Before entering the sanctuary, an usher waits to check temperatures as people walk in and hand sanitizer is also applied at this point. There is no more greeting and mingling during the service or afterwards. Every other pew is blocked off in the sanctuary and households cluster together, six feet apart from other groups. Grace runs the slideshow and also the livestream for people who want to stay home, which she estimated is usually around 15 people every Sunday. Communion has also started again, the little individual plastic cups of juice are saran-wrapped and then a bread

cracker is saran-wrapped on top of it. Like the church services, Solid Rock now meets in-person, inside, six feet apart and masks on. They also cancelled the breakfasts and dinners associated with Solid Rock, but Bible study and the regular Solid Rock night are still happening.

When asked if her community would be keeping these changes after the pandemic is over, Grace said both yes and no. She thinks that at church, some people will definitely keep wearing masks and the livestream will continue. When it comes to Solid Rock meetings, she stated that they are “eager to get dinners started again, but don’t see them happening soon.” Grace expressed appreciation for the group leader’s close attention to the CDC guidelines and hopes to continue practicing her religion in a safe space.