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Religion and Humboldt in the Time of Covid-19

I had the privilege to sit down and speak with Pastor Jennifer Campbell, Lead Pastor of The Journey Church in Rio Dell, California about her religious experience during the COVID19 pandemic. The Journey identifies as Pentecostal Christian and is affiliated with the Assemblies of God denomination. Although Pastor Campbell has been in attendance of the church for many years she is relatively new to the title of lead pastor, having stepped into that position in January of 2020. Jen shared with me how the newness of the role is something that permeated her navigation as church leader throughout this process.

Before Covid and social distancing, worship and religious practices consisted of charismatic worship, and sermons to a small congregation who was apt to interject with thoughts, jokes, or revelations. Communion is personal rather than formal beginning with a prayer. The congregation lines up down the aisle receives the elements before returning to their individual seat or they stand among others and partake in a small communal group. Water baptism is performed in a baptismal tank under the stage for new believers committing or recommitting to Christ. Community was an integral part of this church. "It was fun [...] People could hug, and we had lots of potlucks." Pastor Jen's husband owns a large trailer barbeque and the practice of the church buying meats for grilling was instated by the previous pastor. In the small community, fellowship is very important, and the congregation ranged in 30-40 attendees per Sunday on average.

Social Distancing began in March of 2020, less than two months after Pastor Jen was instated. Even though the community is small, the differences of opinions within the church on how to handle the policy guidelines from the state and health departments was vast. On one hand a few believed the church should shut its doors immediately and if they didn't they were in being reckless. On the other hand, there were church members who believed that the church never should have closed and currently believe that COVID is a fabrication. Pastor Jen would hear each of these very loud voices, and after one service was called both fearful and rebellious for her position. Politicization of COVID did a lot to show differences in beliefs. Yet the church leadership forged ahead, choosing to shut down earlier than the Humboldt County mandate required and move to an online status because above all what they wanted to show their community and the public is that they care for others. They did not want to be known as irresponsible or indifferent for the health of their community.

There have been attendees who have not been able to maintain deeper connections, who have withdrawn from the church during this period in time. It was particularly hard for some church members who only get their interactional needs met from going to church. Widows or some disabled individuals had fewer opportunities for interaction had a harder time. However, for those who have had been connected those bonds to each other have strengthened. The congregation was able to adapt to an online platform and utilizing Facebook and other streaming platforms. Instead of ushers or children church volunteers, internet setup, music recording, and web hosts were needed. As reopening slowly began to rollout, hand sanitizers, wipes and thermometers were needing to be in place. Chairs had to be set up to accommodate social distancing requirements.

Pastor Jen shared that most definitely one of adaptations that is here to stay is attending church online. Even when there is a full return to in person services the online presence will continue as well. The Journey has had several new attendees from outside Humboldt County who watch services online. The church's secretary, of over 30 years, whose husband never attended church; after watching the online services, made the decision to commit his heart to Christ. There are several other community members who are wanting to attend when they reopen. Simply put online services have proven to be another avenue for The Journey to connect with community, both locally and remotely.

Pastor Jen has had a unique experience as a newly positioned lead pastor in the time of COVID. Political discourse, isolation, technology growing pains, and safety concerns have all been hurdles she has had to overcome without having years of experience to draw upon. Yet her leadership team and herself have committed to, "trying to stay connected as we take care of people and make sure they know that we love them." Outreach and generosity have become a greater priority. The church has held a food pantry for those in need and there is a group that travels out to the Mountain of Mercy drug and alcohol rehab to minister there. They extended an invitation to the city of Rio Dell offering their building if the need for it arises in the pandemic as a way to serve and care for their neighbors. Christ came as a servant and it seems that during the COVID pandemic The Journey, led by Pastor Jen, is trying to walk with the same heart.