

# WE HAVE A CHOICE

By Elizabeth A. Eaton



Browsing through my work journal recently, I noticed the date when my entries stopped: March 19, 2020. The next week the Chicago-based churchwide staff began sheltering in place. I remember moving the magnets on the Office of the Presiding Bishop’s attendance board to “out” for all of us, wondering when or if we would all return.

In the early days of the pandemic there was confusion, uncertainty and some fear. But there was also a sense of adventure as I stocked up on dry goods (no flour or yeast) and laid in a supply of dried beans and lentils (which I still have—I wonder if I can use them for pie weights). How long could this last? It was like a global snow day. Until it wasn’t.

Pretty quickly reality began to set in. The numbers of infections, hospitalizations and deaths started to rise. Hospital staffs were overwhelmed. We all worked to “flatten the curve,” hoping to keep enough of us out of the hospital so there would be enough beds and ventilators for the sickest. Personal protective equipment was scarce. Space in morgues was filled, and refrigerated trucks had to be brought in to meet the grim demand.

Large gatherings were discontinued. Our congregations had to adapt to online formats. I was concerned that three Sundays in a row without in-person worship would force many of our congregations to close. How would we stay connected? What would our worship look like? We have congregations where dial-up is the only way to connect to the internet—if there is internet at all.

I thank God for the creativity and resilience shown by our congregations. I thank God for the dedication and faithfulness of our pastors and deacons who have been stretched to the limit. They quickly adapted to make sure that the gospel was proclaimed and found ingenious ways to care for their communities. People checked on the homebound in their congregations and in their neighborhoods. Hunger ministries continued providing food. Bible studies and prayer circles dwelt in the word. We started a COVID-19 Appeal to shore up

outdoor ministries, increase bandwidth, and provide technical assistance and equipment for worship. The church wasn’t closed as some insisted. We had moved to another platform. We know that online attendance, even if for only for five minutes, was greater than in-person attendance and that people who had never set foot in our churches were hearing the gospel. We were all in this together. Until we weren’t.

“Essential workers,” many of whom had low-paying jobs, couldn’t work from home. The inequity of our health care system had deadly consequences. Communities of color suffered disproportionately. People were out of work. Businesses closed. The country came to a moment of racial reckoning after the murder of George Floyd. We went through a divisive election. Masks, social distancing and vaccines were politicized. We withdrew into smaller and tighter groups of like-minded people.

After two years of pandemic precautions, the effects of isolation, chronic anxiety, loss and grief have taken their toll. Research shows that we are angrier, more depressed and less patient. We are all experiencing unprecedented and extended trauma. Frayed relationships take effort and time to mend. There is no quick fix. Care must be taken now so that actions and decisions aren’t born solely or mostly out of reactivity. How we deal with real and critical issues now will have consequences in the future.

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:17-18). We have a choice—we can be conformed to this world and remain isolated and reactive, or we can live as the new creation in Christ and be a witness to the world of the reconciliation we have received from God. †

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