A Different Kind of Worship
By Jan Paul

Remember Co-Pastor Ian’s installation? We celebrated that occasion on Sunday, March 8, but it seems like a year ago. Since then, most of us haven’t seen one another because just a few days later, the unprecedented occurred: Worship in the sanctuary was postponed, indefinitely.

We decided to peek behind the scenes of Montview @ Home, the virtual worship service that was crafted to replace communal worship in the sanctuary. Let’s step back and see how that came about three weeks ago.

By the time of Ian’s installation, COVID-19 was nibbling at our collective attention, but had yet to become an urgent problem. Montview had replaced handshakes and hugs in the Passing of the Peace with elbow bumps and bows. Even that move, says Co-Pastor Clover, seemed “radical” at the time.

The day after Ian’s installation, Clover flew to Mexico for a long-planned vacation, but she stayed in close touch by phone. On Tuesday, the program staff had its usual worship planning meeting and they discussed ways to further limit contact among congregants – perhaps by equipping ushers with gloves and putting hymn lyrics in the bulletin.

But by Wednesday’s staff meeting, the World Health Organization had declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic. The decision was made to no longer worship in the sanctuary. “That was a huge jump,” says Ian.

In short order, they decided on a worship service that would be very different from the livestream we’ve been accustomed to tuning into at 11 a.m. each Sunday. Taylor Anderson, our Director of Communication and Strategic Engagement, urged a simple approach. Taylor, who had headed a team of videographers at his previous church, would be filming and editing the video.

“We decided to be more intimate, more personal,” says Ian. “People want a touchstone with their church in these uncertain times. That was a decision I’m glad we made.”

The result was a 30-minute service filmed and edited on Saturday and made available with a link sent via email at 9 a.m. Sunday: Montview @ Home. It led with a greeting from Clover in Mexico, filmed on her iPhone and spliced into the service. Joining Ian in the sanctuary to lead
worship were Amanda Osenga, Minister of Youth and Families, and Sandy Prouty, Minister of Children and Families.

Ian preached. “I felt the weight and opportunity to be in people’s living rooms at a point when it was needed most,” he says.

Montview @ Home has some of the normal liturgy - the scripture reading, sermon, prayer of the people, offertory, benediction and a few beautiful musical interludes. One bonus is that we can all watch Associate Minister of Music Barbara Hulac work her magic on the organ. Another surprising benefit is that worship leaders can view it on Sunday in the same way as the rest of us. The children’s message, given by Sandy, appears in a separate, five-minute video.

When Clover returned on that Sunday, she knew that the text from which she would be preaching was the 23rd Psalm. She settled on a more pastoral style of sermon, one that is comforting and personal.

“The text serendipitously was perfect,” Clover says. “That was just handed to me as a gift. On one shoulder, there was the pressure to bring a word of hope and strength in completely uncertain times. On the other shoulder, I knew this was going to be in a film and not have the energy of people engaging with you.”

Some elements changed for the second Montview @ Home. Clover delivered the sermon from the chancel rather than the pulpit. Taylor changed the angle of his camera, a Canon EOS M50, mounting it on a tripod perched atop a round table and better lighting was added.

John Goerner, a Montview member who is a professional videographer, worked with Taylor to create “B roll” – the beautiful clips of the stained-glass windows, the altar, the wood detailing, the exterior of the church – which is spliced artfully between the segments of the service.

John also took on filming Minister of Music Adam Waite, Barbara and solo musicians in separate takes. On another day, Taylor films the liturgy, sermon, offertory and benediction. All keep the recommended distance between them and only two to four people are in the sanctuary at one time.

For example, last week Taylor videotaped Ian and Clover doing the liturgy, prayer, offertory and benediction one afternoon. At the start, Clover quipped that it was “the Fifth Sunday of Lent and the Third Sunday of the Pandemic.” An observer noted self-conscious chuckles, retakes when someone stumbled and, under hot lights, dabs at the forehead with a tissue.
When Amanda delivered her sermon to the cavernous but empty sanctuary, Taylor stepped out to give her privacy.

Amanda says it felt awkward. But, she says, “There’s something grounding about creating space in people’s homes for a worshipful moment.” Alluding to her sermon’s topic of “dirt,” she says, “I talk about how people can ground themselves at this time – that they can find comfort and ways of being grounded. It’s hard; the ground is shifting beneath us.”

Sandy delivers her children’s message without the usual array of antsy children on the steps. But she sees the steps as a familiar touchstone for them. “I imagine them, I truly do,” she says. “I imagine all of the time I’ve spent with them. I just call them up. It’s very emotional for me.”

Sandy is using the Bible as an important prop to remind the children that this book, with all of its great stories, is the basis for what we do in church. She hopes to show them that the stories relate to what they are experiencing now.

With the recording finished, Taylor takes the audio recorded on the Sound Board at the back of the church and matches it to the video clips. He deftly edits it using Adobe Premiere Pro to make the final product appear seamless. That process takes 10 to 12 hours.

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After the mayor issued his stay-at-home order on Tuesday, the team considered whether to continue filming in this vein from the sanctuary. They decided that because there was an exception to the order for church staff, and because they’re observing distances and keeping numbers very small, it was okay. “We think it’s meaningful for people to see those familiar symbols in the sanctuary,” says Ian.

But Ian and Clover are preparing for the possibility of needing to film each segment from their own homes. They’ve acquired tripods, lights and microphones to enable them to videotape themselves on their smart phones. Adam is considering what he’ll do from home. Sadly, if this occurs, we will lose the beautiful organ music.

They’re also considering how to make Holy Week and Easter meaningful under such extraordinary circumstances, when we can’t all be together. They think it is important that Montview is careful not to return too quickly to communal worship because of the size of the congregation and they are preparing for this to be the new normal for two or three months.
But they assure us that whatever the future will be, we will find ourselves in a new place with new ways of being church. And, that’s ok. We live as a people of hope, trusting that our future always belongs to God.