

GREENFIELD RECORDER

Faith Matters: Welcome to Zoom church

By HETTY STARTUP

Deacon, First Congregational Church of Ashfield, UCC, and member of the Interfaith Council of Franklin County

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(Each Saturday, a faith leader offers a personal perspective in this space. To become part of this series, email religion@recorder.com)

“Can you hear me now?”

“Please unmute!”

“The host has muted you.”

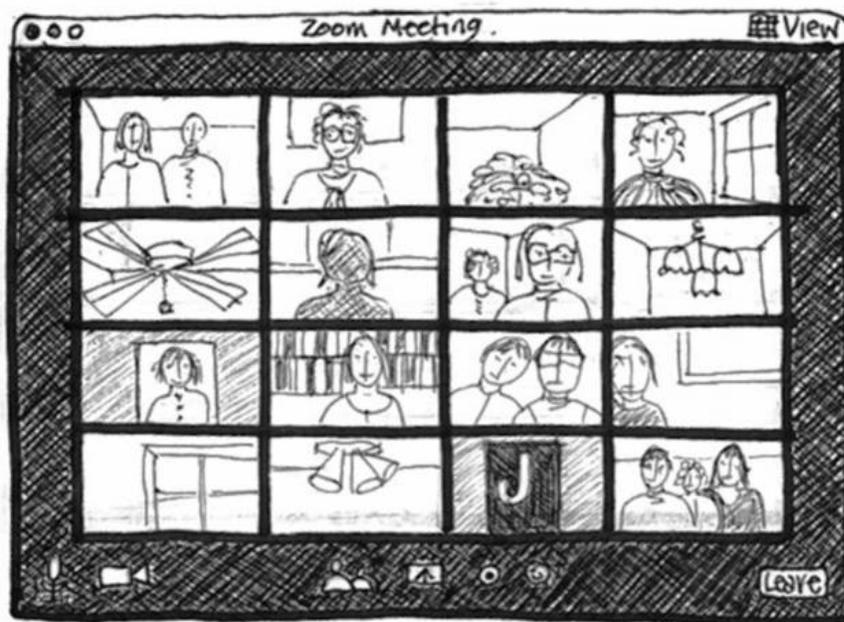
But it’s not the Communion host. The pandemic has made Zoom, a communications cloud-based technology company, the online meetinghouse for our times. Like other endeavors (choral singing, for example), Zoom church has been an evolving experience and I find myself trying to imagine it as a sacred or righteous space. That may seem a bit fanciful.



• Hetty Startup in Shelburne Falls with the Deerfield River in the background. Staff Photo/Paul Franz

Zoom and livestreaming makes sense from a public health perspective while Covid-19 is raging. But does it work for gatherings with a spiritual purpose? We are already tethered to our streaming services and they are imperfect, even surreal to some, and, most importantly, not accessible to all. Zoom adds to our screen time. Using it may even make us miss our loved ones more. Can we really infuse a screen of the dear faces of our congregations or sangha with a kind of embodied loving kindness? We might worry about what is private, what is shared, what is unmuted as we whisper to someone in our pod and it is heard over the Zoom waves. We may wish for what cannot be seen, heard or felt on this platform that would be so clear in real time. Touch is abundantly absent from these online gatherings. That makes some aspects of a religious service very challenging.

Then there are connectivity issues and concerns about unequal access to the internet and/or a strong broadband connection. Some of our hill towns on either side of the Valley still struggle with fiber-optic broadband that is needed for the worship service. Households have a wide range of internet “packages” and the economics of getting connected make for uneven, unequal experiences. We may feel loss upon loss. If the technology gods are equitable, Zoom can work beautifully. I recently attended an Ash Wednesday service with the Rev. Shannon Farrand-Bernardin. Ashes were delivered ahead of time (so thoughtful) and it was moving, with many children’s voices lifting up prayers after communion. And the addition of a self-annointing of ashes.



This drawing by Ann Gibson of Conway offers a playful take on Zoom church, complete with images of the ceiling, the tops of people’s heads, the faces shrouded in darkness, people on the edges of their Zoom window, as well as participants who got it just right. Contributed image

My minister, the Rev. David Jones, said recently: “Churches were going to sink or swim this (past) year based on their openness to finding a new ... life in a new place and in a new time ... characterized by an infusion of grace into all things that we do. The new place was going to be

... a lot more by phone, maintaining a safe physical distance without compromising on spiritual closeness. The new time was a time of revelation, a time of a great unmasking, revealing to us where God was still speaking in our uneven and unequal world.”

So we Zoom. And when we Zoom, we can indeed be unmasked. We may find the sacred in Zoom like “the jewel in the hem of our garment” if we dig deep, finding creative ways to be together. We can try to figure out the challenging issue of music, live or pre-recorded, and the copyright issues that distribution over the airwaves entails. Even when services are back “in person” and doors are opened, we will probably continue to offer religious gatherings as livestreaming types of events. And, of course, we will, like the ancient mothers and fathers of our religious communities, pray outdoors under the stars or with the trees. Or find a stream in which to be baptized. Until we meet again, we hold on to the electric ‘interweb’ of online revelation like one great wing.

But may it not always be so.

Hetty Startup is a member of the First Congregational Church of Ashfield/UCC where Rev. David Jones is the Minister and where she is a new deacon. She administers the online Facebook social media page West County Connects and writes here on behalf of the leadership team of the Interfaith Council of Franklin County. The ICFC brings together representatives of various faith communities and religious organizations, as well as interested individuals, for the purpose of dialogue, information sharing, celebration and social transformation. The Council is in the midst of a series called “Lifting the Veil: Racism in Franklin County. The next programs are on Zoom on March 11 and March 25 from 7 to 8.30 p.m. All are welcome. For more information: Contact interfaithcfc@gmail.com