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Study guide

A look back and a look forward

By Robert C. Blezard

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed churches forever. Though we have lost some things, congregations and members are bouncing back and finding new opportunities and strength as the pandemic winds down.

EXERCISE 1: COVID'S TOLL

Grand Valley Lutheran Church, Canton, S.D., was devastated when it lost its pastor to COVID-19 in November 2020. He was one of about 800,000 Americans whom the virus has claimed as of December 2021. That is slightly more than the entire population of North Dakota. The disease has harmed families and congregations across the nation.

- How has COVID-19 affected families in your congregation? How are they coping? How is the congregation helping them or walking alongside them?
- How have you been affected by the pandemic? Can you describe your experience?
- Have shared experiences of COVID-19 in your congregation or among members served to bring people together or drive them apart? Explain.
- Explore how you and your congregation's members can be more present to those who have lost loved ones to COVID-19.

EXERCISE 2: COVID-19 IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Every community and every congregation has a pandemic story to tell. What's yours?

- Describe how COVID-19 has affected your community. Your congregation.
- What has been the hardest part? How did your community handle it? Your congregation?
- How would you assess your community's response? Your congregation's?
- What has your congregation and your community learned from the pandemic? What's been the hardest lesson? Why was it hard?
- How far does your community and congregation have to go to regain a sense of normalcy? What will it take? What do you think a new normal would look like?

EXERCISE 3: MASK WARS

To mask, or not to mask? That is the question many Americans wrestled with (or are wrestling with) as the pandemic stretches on. Unfortunately, the issue became highly charged with political overtones.

- How was the mask issue in your area and congregation?
- Does your congregation have a shared understanding of the efficacy of masks and the medical science behind them? Explain. If there are differences of opinion,



Study guide: **A look back and a look forward** *continued*

how is your congregation handling them? What efforts have been taken to bring people of differing opinions together for consensus?

- How does (or did) your congregation handle masks and social distancing?
- If there is (or was) a congregational policy on masks and social distancing, how was it formulated?
- Was masking a contentious issue? How did your congregation work to get everybody on board?
- What have been the consequences of your congregation's mask policy on attendance and membership?

EXERCISE 4: VACCINATION ISSUES

As with masks, the issue of vaccinations has been pushed from the realm of medical science into politics—and even religion!

- How has your community and congregation engaged the issue of vaccinations?
- Is there a division of viewpoints or a consensus? Explain.
- How has the vaccine issue played out in your congregation?
- Some Christians claim vaccines violate their religious freedom. Has that argument been raised in your congregation? How has it gone?
- Has your congregation taken any steps to help educate people and come to a common understanding of vaccines?

EXERCISE 5: LIFE AFTER COVID-19

With all the changes that the pandemic has made to our culture as a whole and our churches, specifically, congregations are wise to plan for the future.

- What have been the biggest changes COVID-19 has brought to your community and congregation? Which ones have been for the better? Which for the worse?
- What opportunities or insights have you gained through the pandemic?
- What do you think the future of your congregation will be like? The good? The bad? The unknown?
- What would you *like* your congregation's future to be in the post-COVID-19 era?
- What would it take to enable that hoped-for future to come about?
- As a study group, take the lead in encouraging your congregation to discuss what an ideal “new normal” would look like, so you can lay plans to head in that direction.

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God's work. Our hands.



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Speaking personally, how has the pandemic affected you and your family? Your work life? Your finances? What has been the worst part for you? How are you coping? How has your church helped you? What more could your congregation do?
- What aspect of your congregational life was impacted the most by the pandemic? Explain. How did (or how is) your congregation managing?
- COVID-19 has become a highly politicized issue in some areas. Has that been a problem in your community? Your congregation? What has been the most contentious issue, and how is that evidenced in community and congregational life? How are community and congregational leaders working to calm things down and bring people together? What else could be done?
- Many congregations suffered a drop in attendance and finances during the pandemic, while others stayed steady or even increased. What has been your congregation's experience? If attendance and finances have dipped, how are your leaders working to get things back in order?
- In the article, funeral director Chris Kasler said workers in the mortuary business are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the steep rise in deaths and funerals because of the pandemic. Medical workers report the same thing. How has the pandemic stressed businesses and workers in your community and congregation? What have you experienced? What have you seen? How can your congregation be an instrument of support, comfort and healing to those businesses and workers?
- What have you, personally, learned as you lived through the pandemic? How have you grown? What have you lost and gained? How do you feel about the future for you and your family? What gives you cause for concern? What gives you hope?
- What has your congregation learned as together you lived through the pandemic? How has your congregation grown in self-knowledge and awareness? What has it lost and gained? How do your congregation's members and leaders feel about the future for your church? What are concerns? What gives everyone hope?

A Look Back and A Look Forward

By Stephanie N. Grimoldby

How COVID-19 has impacted the ELCA—and where we're headed now

Emily Landon understood the ramifications of COVID-19 before most people in the United States had even heard of the respiratory virus.

Landon, an adult infectious disease physician and executive medical director for infection prevention and control at University of Chicago Medicine, stood alongside Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker and Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot on March 21, 2020, to announce the shutdown of the city.

She had known for weeks that the virus from Wuhan, China, was quickly becoming a pandemic.

“Back in January [2020] ... maybe even December, we knew there were a cluster of pneumonia cases in China,” Landon recalled. “I kept my eye on it. ... [Martin Luther King] weekend, I was reading the news, and I thought, ‘This is not going [in] the right direction. We’re going to need to do something about this.’ It was concerning for me.”



Photo: University of Chicago Medicine

Emily Landon, an ELCA member and an adult infectious disease physician (left), stood alongside Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker (center) and Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot (right) to announce the shutdown of the city.

Today, nearly two years after COVID-19 emerged, Landon sees the world continuing to ride out the pandemic in waves.

“Now that we know what we need to do in order to prevent the spread of this disease, we can do more of those things. I think we’ll be able to stretch out the lulls in between the waves and maybe make the waves less intense.”

The first and biggest mistake of the pandemic, in Landon’s perspective, was the world’s inability to contain the virus. But in the U.S., a close second was lack of discourse regarding the nation’s values.

“We’re now looking to politicians to interpret science, and the problem with calling stuff ‘anti-science’ or ‘pro-science’ is there are multiple kinds of science: social science, medical science, mental health—and they’re all competing. Kids need to go to school for mental health, but they can’t go to school, because it’s not good for their [physical] health. I think people want to be able to choose their values. ... [But] we never

had any public discourse about what we’re going to prioritize.”

Landon said her values stem from growing up as a member of Bethany Lutheran Church in Crystal Lake, Ill.

“[Churches] have, traditionally—at least, in my experience of being ELCA Lutheran—a dedication to community, to doing what’s best and what’s right, even when it’s difficult to do,” she said. “Community matters; we care for our brother; you love your neighbor as yourself; making a small sacrifice for someone else is valuable, is meaningful. That’s not saying they need to lay down their life for another, that’s a different expectation. I’m saying it’s not too much to ask someone to wear a mask to protect someone else.”

Where we’ve been

In March and April 2020, 43 governors issued stay-at-home orders, mandating that residents stay put and nonessential businesses close.

Many congregations shuttered their doors then as well. A few never reopened, though they likely would have closed regardless of the pandemic, said John Weit, ELCA executive for worship.

Congregants waited for answers, and they came in myriad ways.

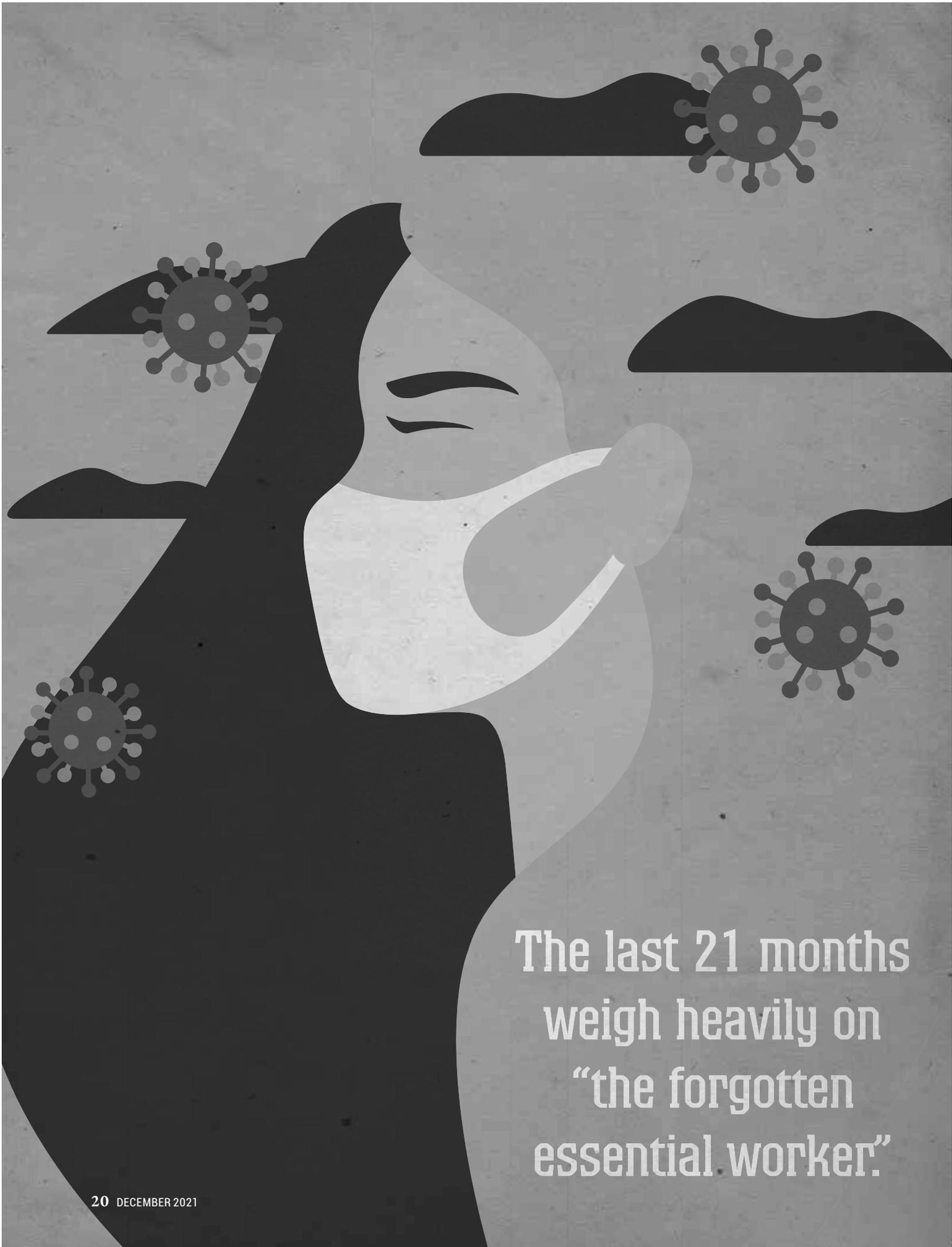
“At the point [of] the pandemic when we started having to be not in person, congregations reacted quickly, and therefore reacted very differently,” Weit said. “Everybody was ... fending for themselves. But it also meant we learned very quickly from many different experiments happening.”

In rural South Dakota, in-person worship services came to a halt, said Erik Scott, who served as congregational president of Grand Valley Lutheran Church in Canton, S.D., when COVID-19 began. “We never missed a worship,” he said. “We started out with just doing Facebook Live right away. [Lance Lindgren, then pastor of Grand Valley] would come down every Sunday morning during our normal worship time [to record a service].”

Many congregations reacted similarly, quickly figuring out how to livestream a worship service, whether it was a live broadcast from the church or a rostered minister using Zoom or another platform from a cellphone in their living room.

“That probably became the most prolific way folks gathered digitally,” Weit said. “The technology of livestreaming and using Zoom to gather fully online is something the church will take well into the future. Digital and online worship is not going away. I think it’s going to be a major complement to gathering in person.”

To fill in the gaps, for 16 months the ELCA worship team provided a weekly “Worship in the Home” blog post (blogs.elca.org/worship), including a lectionary, a set of prayers, readings and a reflection. “[It was meant



The last 21 months
weigh heavily on
“the forgotten
essential worker.”

as] encouragement to worship at home, especially at the worst times of the pandemic,” Weit said.

As time went on and states carried varied mandates for in-person gatherings, churches quickly brainstormed the safest ways to host in-person gatherings. The “drive-in church” model became popular, as congregants parked in their church parking lot, tuned in to an affiliated FM radio station and listened to the service as they “sat”—semi-together—for worship.

Some, like Grand Valley, even offered worshippers drive-thru communion.

“There was a sense of community in that you could see each other, but you couldn’t interact with each other,” Weit said, noting that some congregations, such as Holy Cross Lutheran in Libertyville, Ill., still host drive-in services.

“The technology of livestreaming and using Zoom to gather fully online is something the church will take well into the future.”

In November 2020, the tight-knit congregation at Grand Valley suffered a huge loss—Lindgren’s death from COVID-19. “That was a tough deal because he was such a wonderful pastor,” Scott said. “We had confirmation, and the following week he was in the hospital, and three days later he passed away.”

What we lost

Chris Kasler, a funeral director at Sherman’s Flatbush Memorial Chapel in Brooklyn, N.Y., has seen more than his share of COVID-related deaths. “We were the first ones to get hit with the large volume of deaths,” said Kasler, a member of Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Brooklyn.

Pre-pandemic, a normal week at the funeral home meant roughly 40 funerals in 30 days, he said. At the beginning of April 2020, he and his colleagues prepared 402 funerals in six weeks—95% of which were for COVID-related deaths.

Then they had to start turning people away. “We were making arrangements over the telephone. We were turning down a lot of people. People were calling every funeral home they could, and everyone was turning them away.”

The death counts dropped off toward the end of May 2020, Kasler said, but cremations were backed up six to eight weeks. Because Sherman’s is a Jewish funeral home, bodies could not be embalmed. An extra refrigerator was set up in the garden. It still wasn’t enough.

“People didn’t have the opportunity to pay their respects; people couldn’t give others the emotional support people need at funerals. The importance of a wake—for some people, it’s important for closure.”



Photo: Courtesy of Chris Kasler

Chris Kasler, an ELCA member and a funeral director at Sherman’s Flatbush Memorial Chapel in Brooklyn, N.Y., believes everyone in his industry has been affected by post-traumatic stress disorder over the last two years.

The normalcy everyone craved never came. Kasler still sprays his feet with alcohol before entering his house every evening, because he never knows if he’s picked up the virus from work.

“[Things] didn’t go back to normal,” he said. “It went back to a minimal height, but in October [2020], things picked up again. We’ve been doing about 100 funerals a month—still 60 more than normal—for probably 10 months straight.”

The last 21 months weigh heavily on “the forgotten essential worker,” he said. Kasler believes everyone in his industry has been affected by post-traumatic stress disorder.

If essential workers are weary, so are rostered ministers—not from too many bodies but from too few.

“As worship leaders—pastors, deacons and others in worship positions—we all find our energy when we lead worship when there are people present,” said Weit, a deacon. “It’s hard to bring the same energy to a computer screen [rather] than a room full of people who are immediately projecting that energy back to you.”

Congregations also suffered additional losses: youth lost their confirmation classes; homebound people lost their pastoral visits; and congregations as a whole lost much of their ability to minister to people, who needed help more than ever.

What we gained

Despite the many losses to COVID, there were gains as well.

Grand Valley is a 127-year-old congregation made up mostly of farming families. Aside from pine trees and a cemetery off to the side, the small church building is surrounded by cornfields.

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“God is working in some great and amazing and new ways that wouldn’t have happened if COVID hadn’t been part of our reality.”



Pre-pandemic, about 45 people attended every week, Scott said. But when the church started using Facebook Live to broadcast its worship services, the statistics provided by the social media giant astounded him. Each week between 150 and 250 people were watching the service from beginning to end. There were also roughly 7,000 views from those who started the video but didn't watch it to completion.

“Our giving not only grew but grew substantially during that time.”

The church gained not only viewers but supporters. Once Grand Valley stopped meeting in person, the church removed collecting offerings from the order of worship. “There wasn't anybody there, right?” he said. “So it didn't seem like the right thing to do. Should we talk about it on Facebook? Tell them to mail in their offerings? We decided no. Even when we moved outside and did drive-in worship, we still didn't do offerings.”

Scott said it was “neat to see” what happened next.

“One of the things we were terribly worried about was, financially, how are we going to make it through this time? Our giving not only grew but grew substantially during that time,” he said.

In fact, the church was able to pay off its mortgage and build a cushion for the future.

“We learned—as leadership and as a congregation—if we continue to do things for the right reasons, not be selfish and not worry about ourselves, the Lord will just kind of take care of you, and that's just how it worked,” he said.

What we can do

As time has passed, ELCA congregations have regained many things they had lost. Many ministries have reopened, and others have gained traction with new tweaks made due to COVID restrictions.

Grand Valley has long hosted a soup-and-pie supper to support Love in the Name of Christ (“Love INC”) of Greater Canton, a clearinghouse of sorts for congregations in the city that want to assist people with rent, food, housing and utilities.

Last year, Grand Valley refused to drop the fundraiser and instead held a drive-thru supper, asking patrons to call in advance with their order and receive a pickup time. The event was a big success, said Shelly Gehring, installed as pastor of Grand Valley in July, and it spurred the congregation to offer a hybrid event this year. Patrons could either dine in or call ahead and drive through.

“The thing about it is, the need people have for assistance didn't go away because of COVID, and we still need to provide our support,” Gehring said. “This congregation was very concerned. It's one of their biggest fundraisers to be able to support Love INC. If they didn't do this fundraiser somehow, what would happen?”



Photo: Courtesy of Grand Valley Lutheran Church

Grand Valley Lutheran Church, Canton, S.D., lost its pastor, Lance Lindgren, when he died of COVID-19 in November 2020. But the congregation grew not only viewers but supporters when they began livestreaming worship services during the pandemic.

“I think it is just wonderful to watch, to be an observer of God's work in the world in the midst of unprecedented times, because God is working in some great and amazing and new ways that wouldn't have happened if COVID hadn't been part of our reality.”

The pandemic also forced the ELCA to work through the deeper theological pieces of the “digital-meeting puzzle,” said Weit, including what it means to be “together” in worship related to the sacraments of communion and baptism.

“We're not all of one mind on that in the church,” he said. “That's a yearslong conversation, not a weekslong conversation. It will take the church some time to really discern what will happen in the future.”

For Landon, prayer is what she can do, and she has a personal rule: she doesn't pray for things in which she can influence the outcome. Instead of praying for a good grade, for example, she studied for a test.

“I think I had more fervent and deeply felt prayers around this pandemic than anything else because I couldn't influence the outcome,” she said. “I can't make everything OK on my own, and it was clear we didn't have it figured out. And that strengthened my faith, that we needed more guidance and intervention.”

Most of the time, Landon prays for guidance so she doesn't make a decision that could harm people. But she also prays for understanding—from everyone.

“I pray for God to show people a little spark of letting go of their own concerns long enough to put their mask on, stand 6 feet away when you're supposed to, to not go to work when you're sick and to get the vaccine,” she said. “I pray for people's minds to know that that matters, to know that you are part of that chain of humanity, and we can't be alone, that there is no way for us to live isolated. Everything we do affects everyone else. Then the pandemic will go away.” †

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