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HOT CENTERPIECE

## Technology helping churches 'get the word out' amid virus crisis

By JOSETTE KEELOR The Winchester Star

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The Rev. Stephen Holmes, parochial vicar at Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church in Winchester, hears the confessions of a parishioner during a drive-up confession at Sacred Heart Academy on Wednesday evening. To prevent the spread of coronavirus, parishioners wait in their cars until directed to the vestibule of the school for confession.

Jeff Taylor/The Winchester Star

Churches around the area have canceled services to help prevent the spread of COVID-19, and local pastors are being creative in how they connect with the community.

Zoom meetings, Facebook Live videos and e-newsletters are quickly becoming standard for church members who aren't able to meet in person, and other intricacies of faith communities are also being included where technology allows.

"Admittedly there's so much going on," said the Rev. Matthew Rhodes, rector at Christ Episcopal Church in Millwood. "Things are changing so quickly, and there's a lot [of information] to pass on."

At Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church, 130 Keating Drive in Winchester, two of the biggest changes involve virtual streaming of the Mass so people can attend from home and "drive-through" reconciliation that members can observe in their cars.

"The bishop wanted us to have confessions available," said the Rev. Bjorn Lundberg.

Though confessions normally take place in a confessional, with a door on one side for the priest and a door on the other for church members with a screen between them, Lundberg said using a tight space like that wouldn't allow the church to follow social distancing advice, requiring 6 feet between people in public settings.

Instead, the church is offering confessions in the lobby area and gym of Sacred Heart Academy, as well as in the parking lot where people can remain in their car.

In the academy, he said people can remain 6 feet apart and also stand behind a screen if they prefer more privacy. Confession is scheduled for 6:30 to 8 p.m. Wednesdays and 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. Saturdays.

Other area Catholic churches are also still offering confessions.

In Woodstock, St. John Bosco Catholic Church, at 315 N. Main St., has confessions from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. on Wednesdays and from 9 to 10 a.m. and 3 to 4:30 p.m. Saturdays.

In Front Royal, St. John the Baptist Catholic Church, 120 W. Main St., will hold confessions in the narthex and the stairwell area (when available) from 6:30 to 8 p.m. Wednesday and from 9 to 10 a.m. and 3 to 4 p.m. Saturdays.

"It's been fascinating the response," Lundberg said. "It's been really very encouraging."

Online, where people have been attending the church's Sunday Mass through Facebook Live, Lundberg has noticed visitors from as far away as California, Washington state and even Italy.

The church has also been making more use of other social media channels, like YouTube, Twitter and Instagram.

"We have started streaming Mass every day," Lundberg said. The live video is available on YouTube and later posted to Facebook, he said.

Before this month, the church had about 30 subscribers to its YouTube channel. Now it has about 430.

"So that has taken off," he said.

In Millwood, Christ Church at 809 Bishop Meade Road has been posting weekly Morning Prayer services through Facebook Live and plans an abbreviated Holy Eucharist liturgy at 10:30 a.m. this Sunday.

The church has moved its 9 a.m. Sunday morning coffee chat online as well, via Zoom — "To try to keep folks engaged," Rhodes said.

Both churches have been making greater use of email lately, with Sacred Heart transferring its bulletin to an e-format sent out to 1,300 recipients, and Christ Church sending a weekly email to the children of the parish with activities and videos for them to watch.

"It's written like I'm sitting there talking to the kids," he said. Responses he's heard from parishioners have ranged from a "thank you" with several exclamation marks to a comment he recalled that said, "This makes my heart so happy."

Though Rhodes has issued invitations to other churches that might want to attend the Facebook Live services, he said Grace and St. Mary's Episcopal Churches in Berryville, as well as Calvary Episcopal in Front Royal, have been using Zoom to offer workshops and prayer services.

Calvary posted a noontime prayer service this week and had 233 views and 30 comments on its recent Sunday morning Facebook Live video.

Comments included: "Thank you for sharing the light" and "You thought of nearly everything."

As Holy Week and Easter draw nearer, Rhodes said churches are also looking for ways to incorporate more aspects of the six-week season of Lent into their virtual meeting space.

"Nothing, of course, beats the feeling of being able to sit and be with the congregation in person," Rhodes said. But having the ability to offer online options is something that could not have happened 20 or 30 years ago, he added, calling the timing of having so much technology during the COVID-19 pandemic "a gift."

For Maundy Thursday, on April 9, he said a traditional foot-washing liturgy is being adapted as a liturgy for hand washing that people can do at home. He expects the church will offer a live stream of its Good Friday service on April 10.

Christ Church will also be teaming with Grace and St. Mary's in Berryville as well as the Church of Our Redeemer in Aldie to post recorded segments by members of the congregation.

"Folks will get an increased sense of community," Rhodes said. "It will be going church to church and home to home."

Though the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia has canceled church services through Easter, Rhodes said whatever day members can return will be cause for celebration.

"It may not technically be Easter Sunday," he said, "but it will certainly be Easter."

Join the Sacred Heart live stream on YouTube or at the church's website: [sacredheartwinchester.org/sacred-heart-of-jesus-catholic-church-live-stream](https://sacredheartwinchester.org/sacred-heart-of-jesus-catholic-church-live-stream). For more information, call 540-662-5858 or visit the website or Facebook at [facebook.com/sacredheartwinchester](https://facebook.com/sacredheartwinchester).

For information on Christ Church, Millwood, call 540-837-1112 or visit [facebook.com/christchurchmillwood](https://facebook.com/christchurchmillwood).