Westminster is responding daily to the needs of a world in crisis: The congregation is sustaining its dynamic ministries in worship, education for all ages, pastoral care, spiritual nurture, and evangelism. In the last month, our reach and impact have grown dramatically, with worship attendance via online platforms tripling to more than 3,000 people each week. Our congregation is maintaining its active engagement in the community at a time when many mission partners are depending on Westminster’s support, as we serve our most vulnerable neighbors together. Already, in the last two weeks alone, our church has released $75,000 in advance payments to community partners and emergency assistance funds. The staff team is working off-site to support the church’s ministries, coordinating regular outreach to 200+ people in our congregation and Westminster’s Magnet Senior Center, to check on and care for those who are alone and isolated.

As Westminster moves into the second quarter, we are carefully evaluating our ongoing financial health as we work to maintain this momentum. As of the end of March, overall revenue showed a negative variance. We have experienced a shortfall in giving, beginning in mid-March, following a strong early start to the year. Event and parking revenue have declined to zero with the building closure.

Additionally, from January 1, 2020, through today, both domestic and international equity markets have experienced large declines. The Westminster Endowment is down approximately 15% or $4.5 million, though our management strategies have kept us ahead of the market index. Our Endowment draw is based on a conservative model that minimizes the impact of short-term volatility.

As part of an overall strategy to retain financial stability, Westminster’s lenders strongly encouraged the church to apply for a forgivable loan from the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) of the Small Business Administration. Session approved this plan and the church applied, as did many other churches in our local community. We proceeded with our application through Thrivent’s Credit Union; our forgivable loan (for $520,300 – two and a half months of WPC’s payroll) was approved and funds received April 17. These PPP resources give the church stability and flexibility in an increasingly turbulent financial situation, and allow us to continue our ministries as outlined previously.

The goal in this period of uncertainty is to keep Westminster’s ministry strong and vibrant. We are working to grow the church even now. And, certainly, when the time comes to re-open we aim to be prepared to expand our congregation’s reach and impact in the community. Please continue your regular support, as you are able, to sustain Westminster, even as we sustain those in need.
Wednesday Evening Worship, 6-6:30 pm, has been a place for us to experiment over the past year. Recognizing that the core elements of this service are the contemplative practice of silence and the communal practice of singing together, our leadership team created a template for worship that could be flexible with theme, style, and spatial elements. While many aspects of the liturgy stay the same, each month or season, we have played with changes in affect and character.

This has been a joy to plan from a music perspective, as organist Kenny Vingne, artist-in-residence Jeffrey Gram, and I spread out on the floor in my office with worship resources scattered about, singing songs to one another, tapping out rhythms, and drawing potential layouts of the space. Meanwhile, Tim and Madeline Hart-Andersen are hard at work wordsmithing litanies, prayers, and selecting readings. One of the goals of this service is to worship without a bulletin or songbook of any kind. We hope that congregants can be fully at peace in this space—present in the moment, engaged in listening and connecting.

Our creative juices have been put to the test in the past month as we gradually transformed our worship space into a production studio. We are limited in the number of people we can involve; we are limited by camera angles and livestream capacities; and we are always having to ask ourselves: “how might this translate through a screen?” As we wrapped up our Lenten Taizé series, we wondered what character we might wish to convey next? What messages are people longing for at this time? Where is God in all of this?

As we thought about our church family worshipping at home in their living rooms, turning a familiar and comfortable space into something sacred, we wondered about mirroring that in our own Westminster home. After all, Jesus showed up often in homes, and I imagine they were cozy, maybe messy, unspectacular spaces. So we are invited, during these difficult times, to invite Jesus into our own imperfect space. And we offer, on Wednesday evenings at 6 pm, a livestreamed service from our living room to yours. It is a service of comfort, hope, and joy, with some “oldie-but-goodie” songs rich with harmony, stories of inviting Jesus in, and the holy practice of stillness. We hope that you’ll join us for worship in our Westminster living room.

A Community Without Walls
by Angelique Kingsbury, Coordinator, Magnet Senior Center

When The Magnet Senior Center shuttered its locations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was a swift decision leaving many without an opportunity to share parting words.

Just a day earlier, a box of Shamrock-shaped cookies had arrived for our St. Patrick’s Day festivities. Plans for a six-week Cooking Matters class and a four-week Great Decisions global policy discussion series were halted.

In place of well-laid plans came questions and concerns. How can we be in service to the senior community during this crisis? How do we have a program without walls? How do we maneuver around a deep digital divide?

During this time of uncertainty, The Magnet rose to the challenge. We remain in contact with seniors through weekly phone calls, email messages, and mail correspondence, and we started a message line for participants to call (612-540-2928).

The Magnet staff published a newsletter centered on growth, movement, creativity, and education. It featured instructions for DIY chair yoga, tips for eating healthy and managing stress while quarantining, positive affirmations & mindfulness, poetry, historical April events, and inspiring images. Most importantly, it offered links to information and resources for seniors and caregivers during the COVID-19 crisis.

Westminster’s Faith in Action/Social Justice ministry matched Magnet participants with phone-buddies and pen pals. Booth Manor, a senior living facility in the neighborhood, was adopted by our Families, Youth, and Children’s ministry, and showered with uplifting cards and children’s art.

Our senior friends have responded with tremendous gratitude. In the words of Magnet participant, Larry C, “Thank you for the newsletter! It made my day! You don’t know what you have until it’s taken away! I love the Magnet, and I really miss getting together.”

We will continue to move forward together. We are a community without walls.
From Our Pastor

Dear friends,

On March 13 the Session of Westminster met in an emergency meeting to respond to the then-new threat of the coronavirus. With only a few hours’ notice the elders held their first-ever meeting by Zoom. A mere two hours before that gathering Governor Walz issued the first order in the crisis, prohibiting gatherings of more than 50 people.

The Session suspended worship at the church building for the next two Sundays, allowing for a possible extension of that decision. Within 36 hours our staff team pivoted from a planned live worship service to an entirely online experience. We assumed it would be a temporary measure.

That was then, and this is now... nearly two month later. We have learned a lot in the meantime. We have converted Westminster Hall and the Recreation Room into production studios with stage sets used for worship on Sundays at 10:30 and 5:00, and Wednesdays at 6:00. We have integrated photographs, video, recordings, live music and speaking, exterior shots of bells and bagpipes, including a live shot from Westminster Plaza of the Easter morning blizzard!

There have been glitches along the way. Most notably, perhaps, was my forgetting to turn the mic on for the Benediction outside after the Easter service, just before the Westminster Bells played for the first time.

The important thing, of course, is that the worship of God at Westminster has carried on unabated through these weeks. The new skills we have learned will be well-used in coming months. We can expect that houses of worship, theaters, concert halls, and sports arenas will be the last venues to re-open. Our staff team has begun planning for online worship for the remainder of 2020 – just in case.

While this is unfortunate, it is critically important for our community – a matter of life and death. Westminster has learned to do much online – not only worship, but also education, pastoral care, mission, fellowship, and new member classes... in short to continue to be the Church!

We are seeing record numbers of people participating in church online: weekly worship attendance has tripled. People are seeking out communities of faith for spiritual sustenance and for light through this time of shadows. The church should be in the forefront of helping society change when we eventually emerge from the crisis.

Westminster’s telling presence is more important than ever in this time. See you in church – online.

Grace and peace,

Tim
Westminster’s already creative and adaptive staff has stepped up in remarkable ways in these weeks while we are apart! They have adjusted well to working from home, collaborating with each other in new ways, and connecting with the congregation and the ministries of the church.

There is a lot happening behind-the-scenes! We are grateful for AV and technology staff, and our team of musicians, who help us worship fully as a community through the live stream each service. The facilities staff has been moving throughout the building to clean and sanitize, and tackle a lengthy to-do list of projects. The full staff team meets weekly on Zoom and it has become an important time for checking in with and supporting one another. We give thanks to God for this group of leaders called to serve Westminster and the community during this time!

Even in this time of collective transition, we have transitions to recognize in our staff team. Kasey Collver, who has served in the Nursery since they were in high school, and for the last three years as Coordinator, has decided to move on to other endeavors. We thank them for the ways they have welcomed our youngest ones and families into the life of the church and served with energy, imagination, and love. They have modeled the best of Westminster’s baptismal promise to children and their families.

This spring we also bid farewell to Amelia Gerrard, who has served for the past year as Westminster’s FYC Macalester Intern. What started as a successful internship in the summer of 2019 grew into an important partnership for the academic year. Amelia has been present with the middle and high school youth on Sunday mornings and during fellowship events and retreats, has created thoughtful devotional reflections, and has challenged youth and leaders to grow in faith. As Amelia prepares to graduate from Macalester this month, albeit under different circumstances than she imagined, we hold her in our prayers as she discerns where God is leading her next.

Organist Search Update

The Organist Search Team has decided to postpone the national search for Westminster’s permanent organist position due to the pandemic. We are delighted that Kenny Vigne, our current interim organist, has accepted the offer to extend his interim position through May of 2021. The search process aims to resume in late fall.

We are grateful to Kenny during this time for his many gifts of improvisation, which have provided great flexibility as we are all “improvising” in our ever-changing roles. We look forward to another year of deepening our music ministry in new and creative ways.
Congregational Life
by Sarah Brouwer, Associate Pastor

It has been quite the adjustment, moving from ministry that engages so much in person, to all online content creation and interaction. The benefits seem to be outweighing the losses, though, as we learn how to hold our community together in these difficult times.

In many ways this time has helped us pare down to what is essential within our church family—worship, learning, fellowship, care, and mission. And we continue to do all these things with fewer time restraints. Of course, having young ones at home is not easy, but I find myself even more efficient at the tasks that must be completed, more agile and imaginative with the things that must be handled in different ways, and more active in my connections, particularly with those who are hurting during this time. As a practical theologian and pastor, I have discovered a deep sense of gratitude for a renewed purpose—being a pastor during this time is a privilege and I feel more of use maybe then ever before.

The downside is that many of our ministries have had to cancel events, but some of them have kept going, and they are thriving. WOW Bible Study continues to meet via Facebook live on Wednesday mornings at 9:30 am. WestConnect Young Adults have moved from bi-weekly to weekly Bible studies and check-ins. The officer training retreat was held in early April, and we all (nearly 30 of us) checked in, then we ordained and installed those folks in our worship on April 26. These gatherings have been some of the most beautiful and vulnerable of my life, as we are all coming from our homes, and getting a glimpse into one another’s private lives. Our committees are thinking through what it might look like to create zoom dinner parties, an online women’s retreat, and other all church “events” that might even help us make new friendships when we are apart.

Worship is a strange experience nowadays, preaching and leading in front of a camera instead of incarnationally, with our community. But, we know our folks appreciate what we are doing, and they are tuning in to hear the good news of the Gospel in a way they haven’t before. We’ve been able to do some innovative things with video, recordings, dances, and music that we wouldn’t have done before, and it has included more people in sharing in the work of liturgy.

Our communications team has been hard at work to keep the community engaged and informed, as have each of the ministry teams, with their own areas. It has been fun to stay connected with social media projects, sharing the work the staff is doing but also collecting reflections and images from the congregation to help us stay connected. Check out our #WindowsintoWestminster posts!

Vanessa Uzong (Wedding Coordinator) and I continue to work on re-scheduling weddings, but I keep thinking maybe someone will keep their date and I’ll be doing a casual ceremony on the front steps of the church while guests drive by and honk their horns! Who knows?

Mostly, I’m just in awe of how this virus has brought us together in ways I never dreamed possible. It is devastating, there’s no doubt about that. But, I sense God’s presence in all of it, and in all of you. Holy Week and Easter were more a time of reflection and preparation than they ever have been for me, and I feel so honored to have been a part of it, and have relished it in a way I hadn’t before.

Thanks be to God for this work, and for the Church, and for this community of faith.
Parenting can be challenging under the best of circumstances; it can be even more challenging under our current circumstances. I’ve heard from so many parents in recent weeks that they and their kids miss their church friends, their church family. Our FYC Ministries are based on the promise to love, encourage, and support you and we are finding ways to do that for parents, even while apart.

• Our parent groups have always served as opportunities for parents to gather and share in the parenting journey; they continue to do so via Zoom. Family Matters on Sundays at 9:15am; Moms Group has shifted to Wednesdays at 2:00pm.

• Our newly-launched Moms Group and FYC Families Facebook Groups provide everyone the chance to offer support and encouragement to one another (please feel free to post). Westminster Story Time is posted in the FYC Families Group.

• We offer resources each week in our FYC email including articles and activities for you and your family plus Nursery Circle Time for the wee ones.

• Moms Group hosted its first Moms “Off the Clock” evening gathering recently – look for details for our next one in the FYC email.

• Our first FYC Family Dinner and a Movie happens Friday, May 1 at 5:30. Check the FYC email for details on how to join us in a screening of “Farmageddon: A Shaun the Sheep Movie.”

Youth Ministries

By Matt Lewellyn-Otten, Director of Youth Ministries

The Westminster Youth are learning that community can be cultivated even when we can’t be in the presence of one another. Each week, the youth gather together in the comfort of their homes via texting chains, Netflix Party night, game nights, weekly “Coffee Shops,” and Confirmation class all via Zoom. We continue to share our lives with one another – our joys and our sorrows – as well as laugh and connect about the silly things of life. The Youth Community continues to foster deep, meaningful relationships.

Though there is much joy, we have been faced with some tough decisions regarding mission trips, worship services, Day Camp, and summer-fun plans. For the safety of our youth community and the communities we would have visited, the Middle School Mission Trip scheduled for mid-June has been canceled. This is not without a promise from the FYC Council and staff team, though. We promise to create more robust opportunities that meet the needs of our growing middle school ministries and that will foster spiritual growth, opportunities to connect as a community, and to be of service to our neighbors.

The High School Mission Trip, which has been scheduled for late July, continues to hold its place but will look different. Rather than traveling to Bozeman, MT we will be looking for opportunities to connect as a community during the same time, so we can continue the traditions of celebrating our seniors.
We are all patiently waiting for that wonderful day when we can come back to church and be together again. The Westminster Gallery is waiting for your return too. Gallery volunteers helped me with several installations while the building was still open, and we promise that you will find interesting and exciting things to see when we are able to be together again.

The Corner Gallery exhibition about our new bells will still be there, and will feature a newly completed and more extensive video made by Westminster member Tim Hoogland that tells the story of the bells and how they came to Westminster.

An exhibition of 150 portraits of Town Hall Speakers by photographer Doug Knutson is installed in Westminster Commons to celebrate the Forum’s 40th anniversary.

Westminster’s youth aged three years old through first grade and students from St. David’s Harman Center co-created 56 canvases depicting community during Arts Month. This was temporarily displayed in Westminster Commons and has now been mounted in the hallway of the Education Wing on the second floor. It will be worth a trip to go see it!

The Westminster Gallery exhibition, From Paradise to Passion, was only on view for two weeks before we left the building. It is still there and will be available for your contemplation. Even though our worship has taken us past Holy Week and Easter, the story remains relevant in its message of hope. And speaking of hope, the summer members’ exhibition is still planned as the next exhibition, no matter when we are able to install it.

Members are encouraged to create original artwork that answers the question: Where Do We Find Hope? Submissions will be due shortly after we are able to be back in the building.

In the meantime, we continue to be church together. I am both enjoying and finding comfort in my current role on Sunday mornings and Wednesdays helping behind the scenes to create the settings for live-streamed worship.

How Can I Keep from Singing?

There is simply no substitute for singing together. Choir directors around the world are trying to find ways to pull their ensembles together virtually, but it is just not the same. The choirs at Westminster are mourning this fact while also recognizing that it’s our care and ministry toward one another that is at the heart of our group identity. We are still finding ways to express that care in these days!

- The Westminster Choir held a “listening party” on March 27, what would have been the evening of our concert on the Performing Arts Series, to listen together to James MacMillan’s Seven Last Words from the Cross, followed by a short discussion. We hope to offer more such listening parties in the future.

- The Westminster Choir has also gathered via Zoom to check in with one another and provide support during this time apart.

- Children’s/Youth Choir staff members, Brad Ollmann and Haskel Black are offering a “Virtual Choir Meeting” this week for children and youth to make a joyful noise together.

- The Westminster Section Leaders are working on some virtual choir offerings as well!

Stay tuned for ways you might participate in music education, listening, or other arts engagement. While it is not the same as being together, the arts do allow us a crucial avenue for emotional and spiritual expression and unity through feelings of loneliness or isolation.
In these days of COVID-19, our dwellings and our 6-foot radius of separation can feel like prisons. A few weeks ago, I binge-watched the 4-part 2019 documentary “College Behind Bars,” (Netflix and PBS). Women and men in 2 upstate New York penitentiaries are given the opportunity of a college degree from Bard College, using its student curriculum and taught by its professors. Watch it! You will be amazed and humbled and filled with hope.

In our COVID prisons of one to several inmates we have both restrictions and opportunities challenging our bodies, minds, and spirits. How do we break out? Or break in? We just experienced, once again, the Easter break-out from the tomb and the break-in of God set loose in the world. Like Mary, like prisoners offered an education, can we see with new eyes, hear with new ears? Can we recognize love and hope in the faces of those we thought were strangers, even enemies?

The Good News is that life breaks out anew every second. There is no stagnation in Creation. The cells in every living thing, even our memories, die and are reborn in a constant cycle of birth and death and rebirth. In this time of pandemic, may we discover what is most precious to our existence; what is most rewarding in our relationships; what is truly vital to our health and well-being. May we learn in the days ahead how to share space and thrive together in a room, in a relationship, in a country, in a world. We are all connected in our separations.

May News!
Westminster Bells, Financial and Staffing
Updates, New Ways to Gather...

Breaking Out
Margaret McCray, D.Min., LMFT, Westminster Counseling Center

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Update on Westminster Bells

After months of anticipation, Westminster’s bells rang out for all to hear on Easter Sunday, following the 10:30 am worship service. Several passersby lingered to hear their majestic tones. Since that day, the bells have continued ringing on the following schedule:

- **Striking the hours daily at 9 am, 12, 3, and 6 pm**
- **“Solidarity peal” for five minutes daily at noon, in conjunction with other bells around the cities**
- **Sunday call to worship striking of bourdon at 10:15 am**

We look forward to formally dedicating and celebrating these bells when the congregation is back on site; the Westminster Chime will be heard then for the first time.