I am composing this reflection whilst sitting in my make-shift home office that used to be my eldest son’s room. He is living in Edwardsville, sheltering-in-place, while we do the same here. It is my hope that these words would be light in the long shadows of this six-week self-imposed quarantine and will stave off the prospect of even more. Ironic, really, because I was prepared to write about all the ways we are “Connecting imperfect people to a perfect God” in 2020.

I wanted to write this article the first week of April, at the end of first quarter, using Acts 2: 43-47 as my primary text. I had planned to celebrate with awe and wonder the amazing victories of the first quarter, touting with anticipation what comes next, and prognosticating great adventures in ministry. Instead I sit here feeling like a wordless troglodyte wondering if we will ever stop failing to meet together, as the author of Hebrews (10:25) admonishes us not to do.

Life among the first believer was eightfold, they were together, 1) having all things in common, 2) selling their possessions and goods, 3) distributing the proceeds to all in need, 4) spending a lot of time together in the temple, 5) breaking bread at home, 6) eating food with glad and sincere hearts, 7) praising God, 8) and having the goodwill of all the people. Life was good, and God added to their numbers those who were being saved.

Well so much for that; we are not together; we are not spending much time together in the temple. We have failed to be the church... or have we? We share a lot in common, in fact there seems to be more we have in common than before; this pandemic has leveled a lot. We are giving what we have and sharing with those in need: filling food pantries, sewing facemasks, calling on neighbors, connecting with family and friends in profound ways, supporting neighborhood businesses, encouraging essential workers with gifts of thanks and appreciation, and on-and-on the list goes. My family and I are breaking bread at home together more than we have in years, and each meal is eaten with a new sense of appreciation—glad and sincere. We are praising God in innovate ways, reaching numbers we were missing, and we are doing all of this while sheltering-in-place for the goodwill of all the people, especially the most vulnerable among us.

On second thought, we ARE living as the church, maybe even more authentically than we have in a long time. We may be suffering grief in all kinds of trials, but the genuineness of our faith is being proven, resulting in praise, glory, and honor in Christ our Lord, adding numbers to those being saved every day! Well done, good and faithful church.
It has been an honor and privilege to see the community coming together over an initiative started by our faith community. O-Town proud started with a simple idea and was developed with the input from some amazing people in our community. The idea was sparked with Angie Andrew (Member of FUMC) saying, “we should put together some shirts to raise a little money for our healthcare workers.” From there, Daniel Cox (Member of FUMC) came up with the design and the phrase O-Town Proud. Daniel does graphic artwork for his company Woodchucks Workshop, and he did an amazing job!

From there I met with Wayne, the owner of C&C Sports, and we got this thing rolling. In the first two days we had raised over $1000 and have hardly slowed down since then. At this point we have raised $9000 and are still moving forward in reaching our goal of $10,000. We’ve had a team of people that have been so helpful in delivering these shirts to the community all while social distancing. George and Kathy Vineyard, Lynn Johnson, Angie Andrew and family, Rob Stoelzle, Jessica Lotz, Jordan Thoele, and Katie Wilson have all been on our delivery team.

The idea that we developed is simple, yet profound. Buy a shirt, we buy gift cards from local restaurants, then give those gift cards to our front-line healthcare providers and first responders. The response from our first responders and frontline healthcare providers have been profound. They are so grateful for this community and the love that is being shown to them. You are making a difference in these difficult times!

It takes a community to get through something like this, and you all have stepped up and been that community. I want to thank you for the efforts you are making and for supporting O-Town Proud! I am humbled to serve a community that gets behind a simple idea and embraces the impact that is being made. Thank you!

Romans 12:4 “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function.” We are better together. Thank you!

“\textit{It takes a community to get through something like this, and you all have stepped up and been that community.}”

As I looked back over the last three months, I realized it was a time of crisis and conferences. Several of my family members or close friends have been in the hospital in 2020, and of course, right now our country is in the midst of a major health crisis. Additionally, for the church, we had a flooding issue in the basement at the beginning of January that caused us to adjust our schedule for a Sunday and caused much work for the Trustees.

In the midst of all these stressful moments, I had several workshops and a retreat scheduled. I looked back over my calendar and realized that I could label January through March as my continuing education time.

As I reflect on these two themes for my experiences in 2020, I realize that the times of learning have helped to sustain me through the times of crisis. While in seminary a professor introduced us to a model for thinking about spiritual formation. He said God draws us in, and then sends us out. You can think of it in the same way the blood travels through the body. The blood that desperately needs oxygen travels to the lungs and receives the oxygen. It is then pumped out through the rest of the body. Those in need travel to the heart of God, and then once renewed and refreshed, they are sent back to nurture the other parts of the body.

I’ve been thinking about this time of Quarantine as “wilderness time.” You can watch the sermon I gave on March 22 for more information. Essentially, I see the wilderness experience as a time when God is preparing us. God uses the wilderness to teach us to place our total dependence upon God and re-prioritize our lives. This is a time when God is drawing us inward, but it also may be a time when God is preparing us to flow outward.

So, in the rest of our “shelter-in-place” time, ask yourself: What is God preparing me to do next? As we emerge back into our “normal” lives, who might God want me to serve? What should I be reading/studying/praying for now so that I can I help support the Body of Christ in the future?

I continue to pray that this time in the wilderness will be a fruitful time for you and that you will continue to see God at work in your lives.
YEAR END FINANCIAL REPORT:

“It is more blessed to give, than to receive” - Acts 20:35

“Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” - 1 Thessalonians 5:18

The first quarter of 2020 has been marked from day one with a great deal of change and adaptation by the congregation and staff of O’Fallon First United Methodist Church. In the first three months of the year we have changed our worship schedule from three Sunday services to two. We learned about the upcoming reappointment of our associate pastor and other upcoming staff losses. We have dealt with the flooding of our basement, requiring modifications to Sunday worship and many remodeling needs. Finally, we are now meeting virtually as our entire nation learns to deal with the realities of a global pandemic.

Through it all, we have proven to be a very resilient congregation, as we lean on the promises of God, and the stewardship of our members to get us through. In a time when many Methodist Congregations are struggling financially, we had a good first quarter finishing with nearly $10,000 of net income over expenses. That is a testament to the faithfulness of our congregation during times of change.

Unfortunately, the importance of our giving is not lessened by these numbers. Traditionally, giving is down in our second quarter, and we have not met in person as a church since mid-March. We are relying on you to continue giving in support of our ministries during this time of crisis. Please continue to submit your tithes and offerings. You can do so by visiting offume.org, downloading the tithe.ly app from your mobile phone, or simply mailing in your check.

Help keep our church strong financially as we show the love of Christ to all in this battered world.

MEMBERSHIP

Over the course of 2019, O’Fallon First United Methodist saw an increase in membership of 26. We began 2020 with a stated membership of 638. Over the first quarter we have kept pretty steady to this, with a small decrease of one member. Over the past three months, we have seen a total of seven members join our church through transfer. Four of these came from other UMC congregations, and three from outside our denomination.

Over this same time we have had seven different members transfer their membership out of our church. We also said goodbye to one of our members, into God’s eternal Kingdom.

At present, new membership classes and confirmation is on hold. Our current membership is at 637.

WORSHIP ATTENDANCE

Our worship attendance for February and the first half of March sat at nearly 170 people per week at our 8:30 worship service, and at 113 per week at 10:45. This follows the change back to two worship times to allow for again a dedicated Sunday School Hour.

In March we saw good numbers in our first online worship services as well. In all, we averaged well over 600 viewers of our worship services per week. A smaller percentage (maybe 25%) watched for any length, but we figure each view contains on average between two and three people for a total of probably 300 to 400 who watched the whole service, and easily over 1000 who watched parts of it.
Who would have thought the First United Methodist church would have a flood causing thousands of dollars of damage? No one! Unfortunately, that is exactly what happened on January 11th as water flowed from all eleven drains in the lower level of our church. A blockage of tree roots in our drain line and four inches of rainfall in a short period of time caused water to back up in our sewer lines flooding several areas of the lower level. The sewer line located in the church empty lot by the west parking lot is now repaired.

Another unfortunate discovery related to the flooding was the tile and mastic in our church contains 5% asbestos. We are required to remove the tile from the flooded areas. We contracted with a company to do the asbestos abatement which is scheduled to take place in July. A flooring committee was established to research options for replacing the tile flooring. A product has been selected and will be installed once the asbestos abatement is complete.

Finally, to make our church even more warm and welcoming, other aesthetic projects are taking place. The terrazzo tile in the entranceway and narthex of our church was recently restored, and it looks much lighter and brighter. Also, plans to have the church common areas painted are underway. With the asbestos abatement, new flooring and fresh paint on the walls, our church building will be a safe, sound, and more inviting place to worship for years to come.

MISSION COMMITTEE
By Rob Stoelze

The Missions Committee has been very involved so far this year. There have been two new members added to the committee as others have rotated off because of the end of their 3 year commitment. We sadly had to say goodbye to three members who had reached their 3 year term. Those members were Joan Bowman, who served as Chair the past year, along with John Grissom and Ann Clayton. We are happy to welcome new members Dave Cugier and Susan Bowers. In March, the Missions Committee took several volunteers to the Midwest Distribution Center to help support their ministry of providing humanitarian relief. Unfortunately, March also brought strict regulations to our church community with the spread of Covid-19. Our Potato luncheon to help serve the Guatemala mission trip had to be cancelled, but we hope to be able to reschedule or make other arrangements to help. We have seen our God's light through our church with two projects that are serving our community during this difficult time. O-Town Proud has been a blessing to our community by selling apparel where a portion of the proceeds go to benefit the health care workers serving on the front lines of the Covid-19 pandemic. Also, our community has "Filled the Trailer" with an outstanding amount food donations to benefit the O’Fallon Food Pantry.

THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES:
By Carol Lunan

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STAFF/PARISH RELATIONS COMMITTEE:
By Allyn Wiechert

The first 3 months of this year have been challenging for the SPRC. Pastor Becky Williams received word of her new charge to Grace Chapel in Jacksonville, IL. Becky, Chris, Michael, and Natalie will be leaving June 30th.

Allyn Wiechert and Larry Morrison, representing the Staff/Parish Committee, met with Mississippi River District Superintendent, Rev. Allynn Walker, to inform her that we would not need another minister assigned to O’Fallon First UMC. The SPRC is restructuring our current staff to cover the ministry needs of the church. Pastor Brad Lewis will step into the role as the Associate Pastor.

The church will also be losing Chris Williams, as the Marketing and Communications Director, when Pastor Becky leaves. The SPRC is considering how volunteers and staff can pick up Chris’ many tasks.

Another change at O’Fallon First is Vince Godfrey, the Director of Worship Arts and Music, has resigned his position. Vince will stay with the church through Easter, but plans to move on by July 1, 2020. The SPRC will be posting the Director of Worship Arts and Music position in the near future.

All three of these wonderful leaders will be missed greatly. When you see them, be sure to thank them for their service at the church.

In the midst of people leaving, the SPRC has hired a new Assistant Custodian, Erick Watts. Erick will be working mostly during the weekends to clean and prepare the church for the many weekend activities.

Finally, the SPRC has approved that the staff payroll be paid in full. Though the church building is closed, the staff has continued their work at home as they shelter in place. Our pastors and staff have continued to creatively bring the Good News to the church, community, and the world.
Normally, I would be writing to you to share all the awesome ways God is working in our kids and families inside our church. But, as you all know too well, we are far from normal. The statement, “the church has left the building” could not be more true. It’s easy to let the darkness overwhelm us today, but if you look up and around, there truly is so much light.

When I look back on the last few weeks of children’s ministry, my heart is drawn in two ways I have seen God working during this time. The first is through social media. When this shelter in place began, there were many families that were not connected to the O’Fallon First Kids’ Facebook page at all. But, in just a few short weeks we have already had 15 families join our page. This is super exciting because most of my communication with families about all things kids is being shared on our kids page. Each Sunday, kids and families can engage in two ways. The first is a Sermon Notes page that parents can print off. Kids can then follow along looking for key-words and answering questions about the online sermon. Then at 1:00 every Sunday a kids message is shared. This is a video created just for kids with worship songs, a memory verse, bible story, and reflection questions. This provides a unique opportunity for parents to lead their children spiritually at home.

The second of these moments of light was Easter. I have led kids on Easter Sunday for about 5 years now and this was unlike any other, but it was so much fun. We partnered with The Learning Tree to make Easter bags for families of our church. Thanks to many volunteers within the Children’s Ministry and Learning Tree staff, we delivered Easter bags to over 100 families. Personally, this was such an incredible experience getting to wave hello to our church families and have a few quick conversations from afar.

“Thanks to many volunteers within the Children’s Ministry and Learning Tree staff, we delivered Easter bags to over 100 families. Personally, this was such an incredible experience getting to wave hello to our church families and have a few quick conversations from afar.”

Did I ever picture myself leading children’s ministry through a pandemic? No, but parents also did not think they would be leading their kids academically and spiritually through one either... most while also working from home. So, for any parents who are feeling the pressure to do it all, with little time...you’ve got this, and you’re doing great! But, most importantly, God’s got you and holding on tight to your kiddos. You are so loved, and we are praying for you and your families. Thank you for leading your kids well, and give them an extra hug from Ms. Jordan tonight. I miss them immensely.
Students are in the midst of uncharted waters, they have experienced this pandemic in some of the hardest ways imaginable. Their activities (prom, sports, music, social events) have all been cancelled. Some major milestones (graduation, confirmation, Sr. Nights, class trips) are being affected or cancelled. They don’t have the opportunity to be together, and this all happened without warning to them. We had to cancel our summer mission trip. We also have a student in Boston who just underwent a heart procedure. However, our students are resilient.

The students at O’Fallon First have been impressing me with their love and compassion with one another. I have been able to talk with many of our students and share in their ups and downs. In this odd time, we have groups meeting virtually and in unique ways. Our high school boys are meeting twice a week doing a study from Right Now Media. Our girls have been in close contact with each other, and our middle school boys have taken to several different platforms to try and connect.

We also launched a Sunday morning bible study to be in community all together. Our students are resilient, but this is still difficult. They need you now, more than ever, to be in prayer for them as they navigate these waters from a different perspective than most. These times are difficult, but our God is bigger than any situation. Our God loves us and will use this time to help bring our students closer through study, prayer, and reflection. I am inspired by the way our students are handling this situation. If you get a chance, let them know you are proud of them too!

COMMUNITY FEED MY LAMBS MINISTRY

By Linda Kahley

Boy, it would be great to have 2020 future vision to see what our sack lunch program will look like this year! We know the need will be great, what we don’t know is if we will be able to provide our lunch deliveries as we have the past few years. Will we be able to buy food in bulk? Will the social distancing guidelines be relaxed so our volunteers and kids are safe while distributing and receiving lunches? Will our churches be open, so we can prepare the lunches? We just don’t know.

In March, our church joined with some other partners to provide lunches for the kids for the first 2 days of the school closure while the Districts got their plans in place. Then, for a couple weeks after the Districts started providing lunches, we provided volunteers to ride the school buses and help deliver the lunches. Over time, the Districts no longer requested volunteers to minimize exposure to kids, volunteers, and drivers. The Districts are now providing lunches for kids with delivery or pick up of two meals/student 3 days each week.

So, we hope and plan to provide a service this summer, but it may look very different. I am in contact with school district administrators to see how/if we can support them and in contact with other CFML partners to determine their participation. I have reached out to community organizations like the Rotary Clubs to see if they could partner with us financially or in providing volunteers in case our usual partners are unable to participate. As a church, it’s possible that we will be called upon to assume a greater responsibility if other smaller churches can’t participate this year. Stay tuned! Thanks for your generous support of this local ministry for the past 10 years!
PHOTOS FROM OUR FIRST QUARTER
One of the benchmarks The Learning Tree staff teaches to our preschoolers to prepare them for Kindergarten is the concept of “before and after.” These words are used in retelling stories and sequencing events. If we were to retell the events of 2020 thus far, they could clearly be broken into two categories, before the quarantine, and after the quarantine. March 13, 2020 marks a date past which life at The Learning Tree was rearranged.

**Before the Quarantine**

Before Gov. Pritzker’s order to close schools, the school year at The Learning Tree was cruising along. Parents’ Morning Out returned from Christmas break to near capacity attendance. Play Café grew in numbers and was continuing to reach new families in our community. Preschool hosted an Open House, participated in the O’Fallon Public Library Preschool Fair, and began registration for the 2020-2021 school year. In February, The Learning Tree hosted Valentine’s parties, including for preschool students, a Donuts with Grown-Ups event that brought families together for fun, games, and of course, donuts. The Learning Tree Growth Committee hosted a Scholastic Book Fair which raised over $600 toward the purchase of supplies for the program.

**After the Quarantine**

The closure of schools, currently extended through the end of April, changed The Learning Tree’s plans, but not our mission. Whether children are in our building or in their homes, The Learning Tree staff is working hard to connect with families and to provide resources for education and faith formation. Our staff is sending daily emails packed full of engaging, educational activities for preschoolers and toddlers. The offerings include a daily video from our teachers leading literacy activities, sharing stories, demonstrating exercises, conducting science experiments, hosting Chapel time, and more! Our hope is that this quarantine is a time during which parents and caregivers feel equipped and empowered to continue the work of educating their children this school year. Anyone can sign up to receive these resources at our website, [www.ofallonlearningtree.org/at-home](http://www.ofallonlearningtree.org/at-home).

Easter is traditionally a very special time at The Learning Tree. We have been accustomed to hosting Family Chapel time, egg hunts, and Easter parties. Though this year these festivities would look a little different, we didn’t want to miss the opportunity to share the joy of the season. With the help of First UMC Children’s Ministries, Learning Tree staff assembled and delivered goody bags for our students. Each bag included a “Beginner’s Bible” storybook, a set of Resurrection Eggs which tell the story of Easter, eggs for hunting, Peeps, coloring pages, and a scavenger hunt. We couldn’t celebrate together in person, but we were together in spirit!

Financially speaking, The Learning Tree is enduring the school closure well. While our staff is not at work in the classroom, many are participating in continuing education opportunities, several participated in deep cleaning the classrooms (before the shelter-in-place order was issued), and several are working to compile our daily email curriculum. Thus far, staff pay has been supported by the year’s surplus funds. The Learning Tree Board is working in conjunction with the church’s bookkeeper and the Finance Committee to navigate the path forward, including new government requirements in the Families First Corona Virus Response Act and new forgivable government loans through the Paycheck Protection Policy. For the school year to date (August 2019-March 2020) The Learning Tree has:

- **Earned:** $128,038.57
- **Expensed:** $110,323.55
- **Increased:** $17,715.02

Bringing the total amount of Learning Tree Reserves to $96,619.48.