

## No Christmas carols sung in church this year with services on Zoom

By Brian Bushard

I& M Staff Writer Congregational Church minister Gary Klingsporn is planning a Christmas service unlike any he has ever led. Like so much else in the pandemic landscape, it will be on Zoom.

COVID-19 cases are surging on the island and state guidelines limit what would have been a packed service in a typical year to no more than 50 percent capacity in the church. Klingsporn has been conducting online services all year, but somehow Christmas feels like it should be different.

“People need contact and they need hope and that’s what faith offers. The biggest thing I hear is the hunger for hope,” said Klingsporn, senior minister at the church.

The church is planning a 5 p.m. Zoom service Christmas Eve, as well as a 4 p.m. Zoom service Christmas Day.

The isolation has been difficult and remarkable,” Klingsporn said of the past few months.

He’s not the only minister who moved their church’s services online. At St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Rev. Max Wolf’s services have all been online since October. There was a brief stretch of a few months in the summer when the Sunday service was held outside.

This year, there will be virtual services at 4:30 p.m. and 7 p.m. Christmas Eve and one at 9:30 a.m. Christmas Day. Congregants can see them on YouTube, Facebook and Zoom.

Nantucket United Methodist Church Rev. Tom Richard sees the irony in it all. Just as people turn to faith during a devastating pandemic ravaging the country and crippling the economy, houses of worship are closing their doors out of fear that the very act of gathering could become what publichealth officials refer to as a super-spreader event.

“I think it’s critical (to still have a Christmas service),” Richard said. “We just need that so badly. Religious organizations in general, they’re facing what everybody else is facing without a physical presence. Churches turn to hugging and shaking hands, but all that physical stuff is now verboten.”

however, is still planning in-person masses for Christmas Eve and Christmas day, both in English and Spanish.

The decision comes with extra precautions. Throughout the church, every other pew is taped off. People wear masks. Capacity is down to about 40 people. Sharing wine is off the table.

It’s not the same Christmas mass, father John Kelleher admitted. Like everything else during the pandemic, it’s an adjustment.

“You can’t sing, and Christmas and singing go together, but studies have shown singing projects germs farther,” said Kelleher, who will be leading English services at 3 and 5 p.m. on Christmas Eve, and 9 and 11 a.m. Christmas day. St. Mary’s is also scheduling a mass in Spanish for 7 p.m. Christmas Eve.

“Over Thanksgiving, I thought we’d have to turn people away at the door but we didn’t have to. With the spike in cases, people are opting not to come,” he said.

Rev. Linda Simmons has not led a service in-person at the Unitarian Meeting House since the pandemic began in mid-March. The first few services on Zoom were sloppy, she said. Some people didn’t know how to log in. Music was out of sync. But over the next few months, they started to come together.

Now, the religious services can be something of a necessity, she said. Her virtual Christmas Eve service is scheduled for 5 p.m. on Zoom.

“People are struggling now,” Simmons said. “There’s a lot of suffering. We’re sharing grief and gratitude and to be able to share it and hold it together, it lightens the load and it shows itself in ways we’ve taken for granted.”

“Our faith is really in one another, showing up for one another, supporting one another. That blessing has become more visceral. It’s the depth and necessity of that blessing that we’ve come to understand more than we ever had.”

Kelleher agreed. He said that now is one of the most important times to keep a sense of faith. Holding onto a

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Current state guidelines allow houses of worship to operate at half capacity, or 10 people for every 1,000 square feet. Family groups must be separated by at least six feet.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, there have been 36 coronavirus clusters and 316 positive cases tied to houses of worship across the state, according to Gov. Charlie Baker's office.

One of those was an event on Nantucket in September, which led to 19 positive cases reported at Nantucket Cottage Hospital.

"We know that it's difficult to ask people to modify these time-honored traditions, but COVID has no intention of taking the holiday off and in many respects, it's many of those time-honored traditions that create some of the most significant issues with respect to spread," Baker said in a press conference earlier this month.

St. Mary's Catholic Church,

sense of normalcy and keeping the church open for Christmas mass was critical to him.

"This is one of the great feasts of our faith, the birth of our savior," he said. "Even though there's a pandemic, all sorts of issues in our country with civil division, political division, Christmas still means what it means to those of faith."



The Congregational Church as it appeared, decorated for the holidays, on New Year's Eve 2015.

Photo by Nicole Harnishfeger