



## DIE VEREINIGTE KIRCHE + THE UNITED CHURCH

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### Annual Report 2020 – German Ministry Die Vereinigte Kirche + The United Church

*I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance inflict and pollute others and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely as stated above. See this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God.*

*(Written 1527 by Martin Luther during an outbreak of the Bubonic Plague in Wittenberg)*

#### **Start of the year and church services or "The normal everyday life and Sunday."**

At the beginning of the new year, Dr. Claudia Dziobek took over from Werner Linder as chair of the "German Committee." A plan for 2020 emerged and contacts with a number of local institutions were sought for possible cooperation. These included the German political foundations in Washington DC, German Departments of the universities in the area, German business associations as well as the three other German-speaking parishes.

We were looking forward to the regular church services on the first and third Sundays each month, special events, and the implementation of some new ideas, such as lunchtime discussions for the German Community working in Foggy Bottom, near our church.

The congregation had voted to renovate Roth Hall thus creating a space where these activities along with others such as seminars or movie nights could take place. We even thought about an Oktoberfest in these new rooms. Some of the institutions associated with The United Church had already inquired whether they, in turn, could offer events there as soon as the renovation was completed. Of course, in view of the pandemic, none of the events could take place but we are very excited to report that the renovation was completed in time and that an attractive, sunlit community space is now available.

#### **The Corona Pandemic and "How the Church Took a Leap into the Digital Age."**

On March 15, the last on-site service was held at the United Church. Some members of our church had already decided not to attend this service in person. The Worship Committee decided to cancel the March 22 service and began preparations for online services. In the meantime, the numbers of infections were increasing and church associations were advising against on-site worship services. So, on March 30, we took the plunge into the Digital Age for church services. The first English-language worship was held via the videoconference software *Zoom* and on April 5 (Palm Sunday),

the first German-language worship took place via Zoom also. With her prior experience with video conferencing widely used for continuing education and elsewhere, Reverend Albrecht quickly established the remote services for the United Church, both for the English and German services. The transition worked smoothly and was well accepted by the congregation.

A few initial "digital hick ups" were quickly addressed and we developed good ways to worship together in the German-language services including music, singing, and readings by members of the congregation. Everyone learned about mute and unmute functions and camera appearances became increasingly professional as everyone became more familiar and comfortable with this technology!

A big thank you goes to Birgitta Sunderland and Evangeline Downie, who co-hosted German services. Evie Downie also made sure that the sermons are available on our homepage ([www.theunitedchurch.org/deutsche-predigten](http://www.theunitedchurch.org/deutsche-predigten)).

We are grateful that there is the technical possibility to celebrate worship together and to "meet" each other. At the same time, the longer this exceptional situation lasts, the more it became clear that of course not all aspects of congregational life can take place remotely. But we also found that people who live far away or even in Germany can participate in our church's activities (again). In this way, we experience an entirely new kind of community, transcending physical space.

During the Lenten season before Easter, Pastor Albrecht had sent out impulses twice a week by e-mail, which were intended to enable a conscious journey through this time of the church year. For the Advent season, the Advent coffee took place via Zoom - with songs and stories and an exchange about Advent traditions. Pastor Albrecht created an Advent calendar for our congregation in which she compiled 24 "impulses" for the season and produced 12 Youtube videos where she reads out short stories or presented video clips. The calendar was accessible on the website.

### **From Children's Fasching to Advent Calendar for Children "Celebration as it should be!"**

It filled us with much joy that a group of families had found their way to us and enjoyed participating in our various programs throughout the church year. On February 16, we organized a spirited Fasching (Mardi Gras) celebration in Roth Hall (before its renovation). Dancing, singing, playing - made for a fun afternoon and we looked forward to getting together again for a children's afternoon just before Easter.

Later during the year, we continued our children's offerings through the "Zoom" platform. An Easter afternoon on April 4, a children's musical on May 9, even the lantern parade on November 14 took place this way. On October 3, a small group met at Homestead Farm in Maryland and some Erntedank (German Thanksgiving) themed activities were held on site (with plenty of spacing and mouth-to-nose coverings). Some of the events were done in cooperation with German Lutheran Church in Bethesda, MD. To guide children and families through Advent, the online Children's Advent calendar was produced in cooperation with the GLC, offering a story, song, or activity each day ([www.glcwashington.org](http://www.glcwashington.org)).

We plan to expand the programs for families with younger children and are currently considering summer camps focusing on German language, perhaps combined with music classes given the congregation's interest in music, the available musical instruments and great acoustics in the Sanctuary.

### **Lunch with the Pastors at Noon on Wednesdays**

Was a new initiative jointly launched together with Senior Pastor Federici, from 12 noon to 1 pm most Wednesdays. More than 20 Lunches took place. This important fellowship in the congregation met with much interest, perhaps especially during the pandemic when socializing was severely restricted. Guests were invited for interviews for each meeting. For example, the pastor of the "Gedächtniskirche" in Berlin reported on how the Corona situation was handled there. We also interviewed individual members of the congregation, and thus got to know each other better.

Pastor Albrecht made personal visits to parishioners (responsibly, with masks and social distancing) and maintained contact by telephone, by sending out weekly parish Newsletters by mail (to those who wanted hard copies) and email. She also visited those who were sick via Zoom and arranged funeral services via this portal.

Beautiful events could be celebrated in this way, such as special birthdays and wedding anniversaries. We were surprised at how sustainable the community via Zoom is, that even a comforting funeral service could be designed.

**Wednesday Evening 6 pm German Meetups** continued. The German Language Meetup has also made the move into the digital age. To keep the group together, Rev. Albrecht led the Meetup every Wednesday evening. It is a stable group of around 10 people, with new participants joining every now and then. Some of the participants started to take an interest in the congregation, having participated in last year's launch of the Exhibit of the history of the German congregation of Die Vereinigte Kirche. Sometimes, new members join the Meetup, whose parents were German (speaking) and who would like to develop or maintain their German language skills.

### **Special Events and Ecumenical Services "If everyone wants it, a lot can be done!"**

*Church service at the German International School in Potomac*

On Sunday, August 30, the traditional service at the German International School in Potomac, MD, took place - online with well over 100 participants. This was the first of several ecumenical cooperations via Zoom. The four German-speaking parishes in the region came together for this - a signal of solidarity that was especially good at the beginning of the unusual school year (classes have also begun entirely online at this school).

Father Karl Josef Rieger, pastor of the German-speaking Catholic parish, emphasized in his sermon that it is important, even under these circumstances, that we awaken, encourage and contribute our talents - and he thanked his colleagues at the school for all the effort that this start of school takes. The music and a music video of the pandemic in the service was contributed by students. Of course, everyone missed the bratwurst lunch together afterwards - but we'll make up for that next year!

The ecumenical committee of our congregations met several times to plan this service and also the service on October 4.

*Service 30 years of German Reunification*

It was a "premiere" that on October 4, 2020, German speaking Protestant and Catholic Christians along the American East Coast celebrated and worshipped together. Again, far more than 100 participants came together. The church representatives and pastors welcomed several special guests.

German Consul General David Gill from New York City contributed a Statement on the 30th anniversary of reunification, which included remarks of his own journey as a native of East Germany. The sermon was shared among Rev. Norbert Hahn of Philadelphia, Bishop Leila Ortiz of the Metro DC Synod of the ELCA (Ev. Lutheran Church) and Rev. Dr. Martin Eberle. Rev. Albrecht

and Rev. Karl Rieger were liturgists, offered the intercessory prayer and the blessing at the end of the service.

Wonderful music was provided by the children's choir of the Dresden Philharmonic Orchestra. This choir had been a guest in our congregation about a year ago as a prelude to a concert tour of the USA. Two videos recorded by the Washington Bach Consort also enriched the service with movements from the cantata "Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme" which highlighted how this renowned ensemble was able to perform despite spatial separation due to the Corona pandemic. The offering was donated to ARSP, the American branch of Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste. The director of ARSP's Philadelphia office, Monika Moyrer, took part in the service. A special thanks goes to the proven Zoom team of our congregation, Birgitta Sunderland and Evie Downie!

#### *German-American Friendship Day*

This year's event at the German-American Friendship Garden on Constitution Avenue could not take place on site. Nevertheless, a celebration was held by Zoom on October 6 in cooperation between the German-American Heritage Foundation and the United Church.

German Ambassador Dr. Emily Haber delivered the opening address. A historical overview of the German-American Friendship Garden was given by a member of the German-American Heritage Museum and musical contributions completed the celebration.

In her remarks, Pastor Albrecht reminded that even a virtual space can offer a great sense of connection. She emphasized that especially in times of crisis, the connectedness between people must be strengthened. This can create the strength and resilience to overcome difficult situations together.

#### *Radio reports and interviews with German News Media*

During the protests following the death of George Floyd at the end of May and during the election campaign, we received inquiries from church broadcasters in Germany for interviews with Pastor Albrecht. We were pleased for these opportunities as our congregation becomes known to an audience in Germany.

During the year, both Pastor Albrecht and German Lutheran Church Pastor Dr. Eberle produced radio meditations for public radio in Germany (in German). A total of three contributions by Pastor Albrecht were broadcast in Germany during the week of October 26-31, 2020. Among other things, they made reference to the historic name of our church, Concordia, and to the German-American Friendship Garden. The contributions can be found in the broadcast archive: <https://rundfunkdienst.ekbo.de/radio/worte-auf-den-weg-rbb-brandenburg.html>

#### **Outlook or "What will stay and what will evolve".**

We are writing this at the beginning of 2021 and while the vaccine to protect against the Corona virus is available, we do not know exactly how much time it will take until the Corona pandemic is contained to such an extent that we can have events on site again.

However, the foundation has been laid for a solid and diverse range of programs, and the connections for collaborative partners are already in place. To be on the safe side, we are planning some events online for the first half of the year - and if possible, these will be rescheduled as on-site events.

The experience with Zoom has shown that we may also want to offer some services, such as reading groups and Bible study groups, via this medium in the future. In this way, the long distances in our region do not have to be covered and people from other parts of the country can also participate in offers.

For the church services, it will certainly be another technical challenge if in-person and participation via Zoom are to be combined. Perhaps a "zoom usher" will have to be available for this - that is, an on-site accompaniment of the service, so that everyone who wants to can tune in. We will need a screen and projector, so that in-person and remote participants can all see each other.

Since we mastered the rapid evolution to a digital church last spring, we will surely be able to manage this next step. For a church like ours, which was important to many people at some point in their lives when they lived in this region, this can be an opportunity for further development, an opportunity for people to "return" for visits online.

We look to the future with great gratitude. In a congregational meeting in August, the contract with Pastor Albrecht was extended until July 31, 2024. The German Committee actively supports the work of the "German Ministry" and met most recently on December 17 via Zoom. We are equally grateful that many church members and people connected to the church have supported the work financially very generously for years. We have managed to meet the challenges of this time. We have grown closer as a congregation - and at the same time, we cannot wait to share the beautiful church space, the newly renovated Roth Hall, and our interesting exhibit on the history of our congregation once again.

The year in the congregation came to a close with the bilingual service on Christmas Eve and the service on New Year's Eve together with German Lutheran Church.

*For 2021, this motto from the Gospel of Luke will accompany us through the year:  
**Jesus Christ says: Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:36)***

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