

## Digital Archive Project

Faith has often been a comforting factor for many people suffering through difficult circumstances. As the COVID-19 pandemic began to grow ever more ominously in America, various religious leaders knew they had a tall task at hand in strengthening their congregants and offering a message of hope. Several adjustments were needed in order to reach out to their members once the government decided to shut down or minimize the number of people that could meet together in a public place. Many religious groups established, or emphasized, social media platforms in order to help meet the need of connecting with their people. The pandemic has impacted people in a variety of both positive and negative ways in the last few months. Some people have strengthened their religious convictions due to increased reflection on religious values and participation in religious rituals. Others have become more relaxed in their religious attendance because of the availability of religious services now offered online. These different factors have forced religious leadership to reflect on and act to strengthen their members' faith and encourage continued religious engagement. In this digital archive project I have interviewed three different religious leaders to document their experiences in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first interview is with Mike Edwards. He has acted as a youth instructor for the Catholic Church in Utah for the past several years. Mike believes that the pandemic has exposed contact issues within his church. Once churches were closed, his leadership group struggled at first to find correct contact information, especially for members that were not regular participants. The pandemic forced them to reach out to members in a variety of ways in order to update this information and stay in touch with more distant members. Another frustration that Mike expressed, and he has observed in his congregation, is frustration stemming from government influence in services. While he understands the need to be safe, and advocates for measures like increased cleaning and distancing, he finds it upsetting to see lots of different

businesses stay open but have his church shut down. He argued that in the Catholic Church their services serve a greater purpose than simply doctrinal clarification. While he has been impressed with the ability of church leaders to post information on social media, he believes that many of the ritualistic elements of religions can not be adequately pushed online.

In the interview with Rabbi Ari Lorge he discusses an interesting difference to political involvement. His frustration with the government has not stemmed from their decision to shut down the church but their limited action and inability to work together to help the states. One of the most interesting points he made was about the Jewish principle of Pikuach Nefesh. This core principle of Judaism encourages the sanctity of life and the need to preserve it. Even before the state of New York officially shut down their meetings he and his rabbinical team decided to close in-person services. The decision came because they noticed that more vulnerable members were too willing to come to services despite the potential danger in attending. They tried offering online platforms for these members but when they continued to show up in person he decided to close services to protect them. As a Reformed Jew, he admits that they are more willing to adapt services, some of which he never imagined could be streamed online, in order to protect and support their members. Rather than worry about the streaming services like Mike did, he has applauded the efforts to significantly ramp up online platforms to reach a larger audience. He does admit that this is not without sacrifice. Like Mike, he said that some people are not only grieving because of the loss of a loved one or job, but the loss of events not taking place as they had hoped. Certain events like the bar or b'nai mitzvah signal the introduction of Jewish youth into adulthood and are often great celebrations. These celebrations, weddings, baby blessings etc have all needed to continue without much of the fanfare that would normally be given to them. While he feels bad for this, he says the leadership in his group have tried to emphasize support for the community and the need to transform the individual home into a religious sanctuary, much as the Israelites did with the movable tabernacle.

The final interview comes from the perspective of Shawn Fessler, a member of a local bishopric in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He shares some of the political frustrations of the others and mentioned that this has split some members in his congregation. He believes the local leadership are nervous to enforce some of the political mandates such as wearing masks for fear that some may be offended and leave. Even though this has necessitated some uncomfortable conversations he feels there has been more positive than negative religious impact due to the pandemic. He feels that many people have a renewed faith in the church leadership for preparing people to establish home centered learning even before the pandemic broke out in America. He also thinks that this has placed the responsibility of teaching back on parents with church support rather than the other way around.

Two common thoughts and observances between all three interviews is the growth in a sense of community and a concern for the youth of each congregation. All three emphasized the individual work being done at the local level. Neighbors and regular church goers taking the initiative to support others in their community. This increase in charitable giving has been a positive observance made in each of the interviews. Shawn mentioned that when he looks at contributions given this year, more people are choosing to give more in offerings than they had previously. He said that he knows several people who feel they have been blessed in terms of job security and feel a desire to pay it forward in the church. He also attributes part of this to the lack of spending options. With people not traveling, dining out, or spending money on recreation as much due to closures, they have more money to give to the local church. All three interviewed believed that religion helps establish a sense of community that works to aid in difficult times like 2020. The second common idea in all interviews was a concern for the youth, especially teenagers. In each church, those interviewed claimed that special efforts were being made to keep teenagers involved in religious engagement. This included a larger social media push, charity work, and other distanced social activities.