

Custom-made M&M's help say goodbye during the time of COVID

A Practitioner's Story

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This Practitioner's Story is about entering into adaptation and change. The focus is on the youth group but the theme is about maintaining caring and loving relationships as we learned to interact while physically distant.

The world turned upside down in the second week of March 2020 as our slow response to the deathly impact of what is now simply called COVID unfolded. At that time I was in the middle of the fourth month of an eight month appointment as the Interim Rector of St. Timothy's Wilson NC.

The week began on Sunday with what turned out to be the last time we worshipped in the church as well as the last time I was physically with the amazing Youth Group. That Sunday evening we made a short video to support the search process with the young people speaking directly to the next rector with their hopes and dreams. The last time to physically meet with the Vestry was on Tuesday. We celebrated our three plus months together with a supportive Mutual Ministry. The work within the search process that focused on the updated website was reviewed and approved. Wednesday found over fifty people gathered, again for a last time, to sit at tables and work with me on the importance of The Rule of St. Benedict. Then Thursday came as did the Bishop's directive that changed parish life. Over the next two days, much adaptation to a new reality slowly unfolded. My week away to teach a gathering of Interim Ministers was cancelled. My ZOOM and video production skills were put to the test. Caring and loving from a distance became my norm.

The Youth and I gathered on ZOOM just about every other week as March was ending and a very different Holy Week was dawning. They had begun their own life transition to online school. Another ZOOM meeting needed to be interesting (as is the case with any youth activity!) and serve as the place to check-in with friends. The St. Timothy's Youth Group was similar to others as these young people were spread among different schools and grades. The Youth voiced a Stations of the Cross video that I made for Holy Week. Over time, many of them recorded readings, either prayers or scripture, for inclusion in the Online Worship Videos I produced weekly for the congregation. They shared short videos captured on their smartphones over our ZOOM Youth Group meetings.

However, the memory of what our March video proclaimed was always a part of those meetings as my time with St. Timothy's would end in July. The Youth decided June 28th would be our last meeting as summer was approaching. How to say goodbye?



I contracted for packages of custom-made M&M's. Each package contained red, green, and yellow M&M's that were imprinted with one of the following expressions: ST.TIM'S, LOVE WINS, YEA EYC, FR BILL. The M&M packages were mailed to the Youth with an invitation to the final meeting along with a request to watch a movie on Netflix called "The Healer." This invitation was also sent by text and email.

About eleven of the Youth were able to gather on ZOOM that final evening. We talked about the theme of the movie and then opened our M&M packages and shared a form of chocolate communion. An awkward, and for me, tearful dismissal concluded our time together.

A story such as this written by a practitioner such as myself can easily fall into the realm of proclaiming competence. COVID has challenged so much of how we engage our work. There is so much more that grounds what we do than practical application of theory or even the care and concern offered as a pastor when the world, indeed, seems to be upside down. I learned later from the father of one of the newest Youth members that she was extremely excited to receive her package of M&M's and the invitation to the meeting. It meant that she was finally old enough to be in the Youth Group. Sometimes unexpected outcomes such as this one are the mark of the Holy. It should not surprise me, but it does.