The COVID-19 pandemic has been devastating to individuals, families, communities, and economies and has challenged the church in numerous ways. What changes have you seen in the church during the pandemic, and what lessons might we learn? How can the church’s witness be strengthened as a result of COVID-19?

ELONA SAYS: One of the notable consequences of the pandemic was the unexpected sudden disruption of our lives in this massive societal and humanitarian tragedy around the globe. It affected all activities and personal routines and blurred any distinctions about what was ‘normal.’ Presbyterians and other faith communities had to rapidly mobilize safety precautions and resources and adapt to wave after wave of crisis contingencies. Due to various executive orders to shelter at home and shut down, they faced immediate challenges to communicate, congregate and coordinate. I was meeting with presbytery executives in Dubuque when states’ news hit, and folks left as their governors announced stay orders.

Changes we have seen: Councils and churches prioritized and reassigned staff, rerouted finances, and repurposed facilities. They quickly innovated to remote worship options, electronic meetings, and social media messaging. Grassroots mixtures of collegial associations, stated clerks, mid council executives, office administrators, treasurers, educators, moderators, and technology staff huddled to leverage their scope of authority, interpret complex initiatives, and navigate municipal guidelines. Worship, funerals, weddings, baptisms and communion adapted to revised procedures. My synod organized emerging relief strategies assisted by zoom. Pastors exchanged equipment and instructions for worship services in time for Easter. Conferences went remote. Online participation, became more accessible, exceeding past attendance. Volunteers made masks and supported deliveries of school supplies and groceries. Deacons and COMs phoned prayers through directories. Staff met electronically and payroll and banking rolled out from home offices. Chaplains and grief counselors kept pastoral teams updated. Efforts have been amazing, creative, imaginative, dedicated, tireless, thoughtful, resilient, and exhausting.

We have learned:

- **Traumatic stress**, absorbed by caregivers, clergy and responders, is cumulative and leads to acute exhaustion, compassion fatigue and diminished recognition of boundaries.
- Mental health, emotional and spiritual care are needed as much as public health and safety cautions.
- Church leadership, mid council management and Board of Pensions need to provide practical, accessible, flexible support and COVID specific relief.

We recognize the need to:

- Deliver online counseling, health assessments, family support, financial management.
- Collaborate on local emergency management, volunteer resources, funeral services, and school support.
- Boost promotion of OGHS, PDA, SDOP, PHP and Matt 25 opportunities.
- Offer space for lament and self-care in our liturgy.
• Reexamine our polity, theology and practices and assess community relations and disaster plans to incorporate flexibility in any response to crisis.

To strengthen our witness, we must:

• Prepare response, recovery and repair plans now for the next disaster.
• Optimize virtual engagement as a necessary and irreplaceable supplement, not limited to emergency usage.
• Adapt structures, policies, and processes faster.
• Protect vulnerable persons in community – elders, sick, poor, incarcerated and oppressed.
• Address racial and economic disproportionality when disaster exposes conditions that cause injustice and inequities in health care and related cost increases.
• Capitalize on technology to access networks and join interfaith exchanges of information.
• Resilient and smart financial recoveries.

The church needs to flex its spiritual fortitude in public space outside of the pew. This pandemic forced us to separate from our familiar past to really see a new iteration of energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.

GREGORY SAYS:

The church has demonstrated an incredible adaptability and resilience in the wake of this pandemic. One of the most salient ways this has been manifested is through the use of social media and other virtual tools. It has been a learning experience for most of us that we seem to be embracing with the realization that this has to be an essential and indispensable part of how we do ministry in the 21st century. However, although it is an invaluable supplement it is not a substitute for in person gatherings. We will continue to heed the counsel of the Letter to the Hebrews to “forsake not the assembling of ourselves together” while augmenting and enhancing our ministry capacity with the virtual piece.

In many ways, COVID-19 is the crisis that reveals the crisis we were already in. It has, in a manner of speaking, democratized the suffering of the poor and people of color whose conditions, concerns and challenges have been ignored for generations. With so many more now being affected, it can no longer be ignored. Instead of pining and wishing for a return to the status quo ante, we have to commit ourselves to a fundamentally different way of being in the world that is life giving and life sustaining for all God’s children and all of creation. And the Matthew 25 Initiative of the PCUSA is one of the ways that we are addressing this as a denomination by promoting congregational vitality, the dismantlement of structural racism, and the eradication of systemic poverty.