



Dear Westwood Members and Friends,

The Peter Bowden Video Ministry team has shaped much of what I'm doing and how I'm doing programming this year. This approach continues to have positive effects, with our online engagement going up and folx from congregations all across the continent enjoying and sharing our weekly Story Corner Facebook Live Videos. When we began the Live Videos in the fall they were reaching between 60 and 200 people, and now they regularly reach anywhere between 600 and 2000 people with folx from all over asking permission to share them with their RE kids. This is primarily due to the fact that I share the stories to all UU groups and Pages I am a part of, as well as a number of relevant local pages.

Regarding our Youth Program, affectionately referred to as Cosmic Connections, they requested to get together more often when Covid hit so we went from bi-monthly to weekly. I learned how to use a new online platform called Discord in the spring because it was their preference for connecting online, and we've seen between 3 and 7 youth every week since. This trend continues.

Over the summer we were gathering twice a week, also on their request. I maintained it over the summer on my own time because I wanted to continue providing a place for our youth to connect. I'm also volunteering my time for regional and national online events to be able to fit them into the schedule because I feel the connection to our wider community is more important than ever right now and our youth are more likely to attend when I do, and have been. This past month some of our youth and I attended a popcorn theology event hosted by the Unitarian Church of Calgary, and we had great conversations about ways to spot fake news, fact checking, and the media's use of fear after watching the film Zootopia. We also agreed to use part of our youth budget to fund a Minecraft server that is accessible to other youth across the country. Minecraft is a game that promotes cooperative online building projects, creativity, and sharing and distribution of resources in very innovative ways. The youth and I, as well as Religious Directors from our region and our Committee Members, have had very helpful conversations about online safety and how we monitor the game and ensure it is safe and fun for friends coming to join us. We have also recently started getting together with some youth from an Utah congregation every couple weeks to play Minecraft together.

Our three core youth also took Tech training this summer and have all run slides for summer services. They also all volunteered to be our main tech people for our online Winter Solstice Service!

Our All Ages Services continue to be well attended and well received online. Our Speaking Softly Service in January had very positive feedback. This service had input from our CYRE Committee and Lorian, our Board Liaison, and was a multimedia extravaganza of puppets and a felt board animation that I created.

When we first got started online and were very much in coping mode, we weren't sure if Sunday Stories would be a part of our longterm plan due to there also being a weekly story, but this year they are back by popular request! Spruce's adult friends wanted to see erm during services, so Spruce has now been telling one story a month with some of our Saturday Story friends and a little help from me. I've put many loving hours of volunteer time creating all of our puppets to help spark new stories and all of our imaginations!

It's definitely hard to know how to engage new children in a time when you can't meet them and connect with them in person, but we're working hard and good things are happening. It's a very challenging time, but that hard work is going towards learning to engage with these new limitations we find ourselves with. Our main programming for young kids right now is our Story Corner time and All Ages Services, and we are excited to have a new baby who loves our puppets! Good things are happening!

One of the ways which we are adapting is that I'm doing much needed tech and social media support as part of my role now. The primary tasks of this role is creating content for social media and running our slides every Sunday that I'm available, which is very nearly every week. I also create the slides for services that are guest speakers most of the time.

Our world has changed, and we can only go forward into it by changing with it. It is my hope that the new tools I've been learning and implementing will be a part of that forward motion for our organization that our theme this year so aptly speaks to. We heard the words of Olivia Butler in Avery's incredible service in 2019, and to close I always feel that they bear repeating:

"All that you touch
You Change.
All that you Change
Changes you.
The only lasting truth
is Change.
God
is Change."

Much Love,
Ilara Stefaniuk-Gaudet (they/them), Director of Religious Education