

# In The Way

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## Merry Christmas, and a Blessed 2021

The year is coming to a close in a couple of days, on my 48<sup>th</sup> birthday. Twenty twenty started in relative normality for us as we returned from a week's vacation in southwestern Ohio. I then made my first trip to Belize for our annual regional team planning meeting, outside of the Dominican Republic for the first time since I began my service as an area facilitator in 2015. Our first morning there we woke to news of a major earthquake in Puerto Rico – a sign that 2020 would be "not normal" – and not in a good way.

January, then February, saw two trips to Puerto Rico to help plan out our newest disaster response. The end of February I was in the Cayman Islands with a couple who will be our new missionaries for Safe Harbour Lutheran Church, the Paul family. I then went over to Haiti to help with the dedication of four church buildings. I remember, while there, talking with our LCMS Disaster Response director Ross Johnson about this novel "coronavirus" emerging from China, and how our Synod might handle a pandemic if it came to North America.

I was home for only a few days before I was back in Puerto Rico for our semi-annual FORO partners meeting. It was while there that Canada announced it would be requiring all citizens to quarantine on their return to the country. Sophia and Olivia were sent home from school on Thursday, March 12, expecting to return March 16. They would not have in-person instruction again until September. I returned home early on March 15 to do a two week quarantine. When it was over, schools, businesses, restaurants and churches – everything – were closed indefinitely. Not just in Quebec, but all over the world. My first worship service back at home was online, on March 22. We would not have a communion service again until July 5.

And just like that, my job changed. Grounded in Montreal, with a deaconess intern (possibly) on her way from Chicago in June, I worked on expanding our mission here and connecting with missionaries in Jamaica, the Cayman Islands and Puerto Rico via Zoom. Online Bible studies and adult instruction were added to online and, eventually, live streamed services from our Ascension building. Members from the Cayman Islands, without an on-site pastor since April, joined our "virtual fellowship." Our internet outreach expanded into French. Our English outreach classes shifted to online, grew, and we added an additional class each week. Sunday School went "virtual," and we added two young LCMS boys from the US Virgin Islands. We confirmed a new member, and he and his young son joined our fellowship on December 13. Members estranged from the congregation have returned, and new visitors have been coming as well. Mission goes on.

Some have bemoaned this pandemic as a disaster for the church, and even a plot against her. Some have felt the same way as the director of NASA on hearing of the explosions on the Apollo 13 spacecraft: "This could be the worst disaster NASA's ever experienced." Guided by Joseph's words in Genesis 50:20, I took the attitude of flight director Gene Kranz: "With all due respect, I believe this is going to be our finest hour." I still feel it could be, if we seize Christ's promise to be with us always, even to the end of the age, and put into practice his call to serve and love our neighbor in all circumstances. May that mission continue into 2021, by God's grace!

