

Looking Back

Glimpses of the Pandemic

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Many of us distinctly remember March of 2020. It is when we received emails from our institutions that read something like this: “Following guidance from Allegheny County officials and in an effort to help stop the spread of COVID-19, the Seminary campus is closed effective Tues., March 17 for a minimum of 14 days” (President Esterline, pers. comm., March 16, 2020). Little did we know then that the “minimum of 14 days” would stretch to over a year, and that we would experience one of the most extraordinary times of our lives.

This chapter is intended to help us remember and process, through photographs, what we experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, with an emphasis on the first two years (2020-2021). The images also include descriptions and thoughts from the photographers – our fellow theological and religious studies librarians.

Libraries

We have known for a while that theological education is, to put it nicely, going through substantive change (Ruger and Wheeler 2013). As institutions struggle with decreased enrollment, finances, course delivery, and a host of other issues, so do their libraries and library staff. While I think a lot of us could use less experience “pivoting,” theological librarians are some of the most adaptable professionals out there. Dealing with change on a regular basis before the pandemic gave many of us an advantage in dealing with the sudden lockdowns and tremendous upheaval of our work lives.

Library staffs around the world sprang into action and began planning for an extended library closure. Most of this planning prioritized the continued provision of resources and services for library users, especially students and faculty. In their article on the experiences of theological libraries during the pandemic, Megan E. Welsh, Ian Burke, and James Estes described the early response to the pandemic in this way:

Methods employed by theological libraries in response to the pandemic included limiting the number of persons in the building at one time, symptom checks for employees, contact tracing, and quarantine for employees with symptoms or in contact with a known COVID-19 case. Some interview respondents also mentioned quarantine of materials brought in from outside the library, although the efficacy of this practice at limiting the spread of disease was questioned by one respondent. In general, pandemic mitigation measures were adopted in support of practical goals, such as allowing a return to in-person campus operations or supplying patrons with needed materials while reducing the risk of disease transmission. (2021, 8)

Who can forget trying to figure out where to get masks, and which masks to get (remember cloth masks?)? Or putting up social-distancing signage? Or assigning particular people to particular tasks (like checking in book-drop books) in the closed library building? And of course, many librarians sought to enhance their online offerings by purchasing e-books, developing online instruction, providing chat reference for the first time, or exploring controlled digital lending. Research guides, such as LibGuides, and website content increased. Articles and chapters were scanned for faculty. Creative ways of

getting print books to people were developed. Library projects, put off or not possible previously, were completed.

The following photographs illustrate some of what we dealt with in our Libraries when they were closed. While there is no doubt that there were limits to what we could provide for our Library users, there is also no doubt that we were committed to supporting them and innovating to meet their needs.

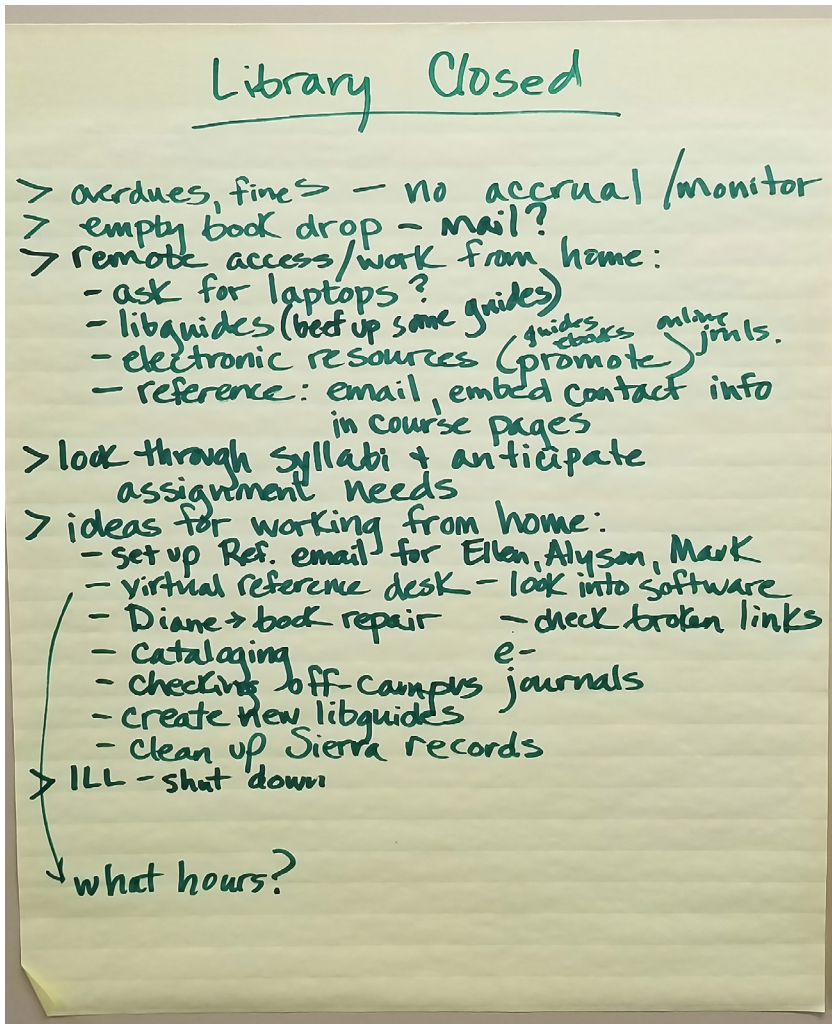


Image 1: Little did I know that this staff brainstorm session was the early beginnings of what would become a more formal Library closure and reopening plan. Photo by Michelle Spomer

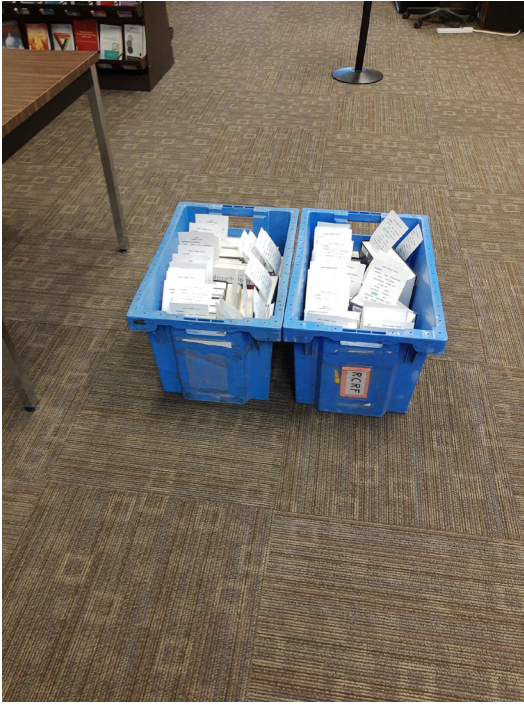


Image 2: This photo shows a pile-up of returns (we usually only have one or two books in a single bin three times a week instead of two full bins as shown) as the sorting facility was closed and various libraries had different types of availability... Some of the other institutions [in our consortium] had to stay online for a full year longer than we did, and did not offer the same level of physical in-person service, but had more capability for offering virtual services. Some libraries chose to quarantine books for varying lengths of time and one library even purchased a sterilization machine. It was a fascinating time to learn and grow together. I am thankful we were not alone. Photo by Karina Dunn



Image 3: As soon as we were closed to the public in the spring of 2020, we created low-touch 'Library Takeout' at our front door. Clients phoned or e-mailed to tell us what they needed, and we let them know when it was available for pickup. When they came to the door, they phoned our main desk and we brought the item(s) to them on a socially-distanced cart. This picture was taken before we knew about the need to mask. Photo by Marci Frederick



Image 4: Throughout the lockdown [I] would visit to inspect all library areas with collections. Finding and affording unanticipated childcare needs was a challenge. Although the policy was only one staff member in the building per day, the lovely exception was [me] with [my] daughter, Maeve. Here she is showing which letters of a rare book title she can read ('what story is so long you need a book this big anyway?'). Photo by Patrick Milas



Image 5: During the pandemic, working from home was not an option for us. Since we no longer allowed the public into the library and students were taking classes online for the rest of the 2020 spring semester, we had less foot traffic and in-person requests for help. So we spent more time weeding the collection, cleaning shelves, and shifting books. While students returned in person for fall 2020 and the general public was permitted into the library in early 2022, we continued the work. These two photos show a before and after shot of the weeding and shifting. Photos by Connie Song



Image 6: This was the consistent pandemic view from my office out into the deserted library reference area. I found it so very sad not to share this beautiful library with others; even though we were open on a limited basis to members of the seminary community, we had very few visitors because of the caution around spreading illness, and it has taken (and will continue to take) some time to rebuild trust in using public spaces. Photo by Karl Stutzman



Image 7: Learning to understand without seeing people's lips. Photo by Karla Grafton

Working from Home

As the pandemic progressed, we realized that working from home would become normal for most, if not all, Library staff. While some positions lent themselves to this new work modality, others were more problematic. Who would receive the mail and process print publications and ILL returns? Who would empty the book drop? Who would water the plants? How would books be shelved? Who would take care of getting books to our users? In my situation, I was the answer to these questions because I was the only one approved to be on campus in the early months. However, these visits to the Library were only a small part of my work week. For most of 2020 and 2021, I worked from home, as did the rest of the staff, with only necessary visits to the building.

Online, any circumstance became normalized. Dining rooms, bedrooms, and living rooms became our offices. Many of us had to balance family needs, such as taking care of children or homeschooling, with the demands of our jobs. Some of us adopted new pets (also known as “co-workers”). And then there were the ubiquitous online meetings, classes, and research assistance using Zoom, Microsoft Teams, GoToMeeting, and many other video conferencing platforms. “Zoom fatigue” became a reality (Ramachandran 2021). So did Zoom bingo (“Zoom bingo!” 2020). While some thrived in this online environment, many of us were looking for ways to boost morale (Williams 2021).

The images that follow are reminders of our work lives in the midst of quarantine. Some of us may still work from home more than we did pre-pandemic, while others have happily gone back to their previous work environments. It is clear, though, that how we do our work has changed – in many cases, significantly.



Image 8: For me, Zoom meetings were lifelines for connecting and getting things done, but also amplifications of isolation and disquiet. Photo by Michelle Spomer

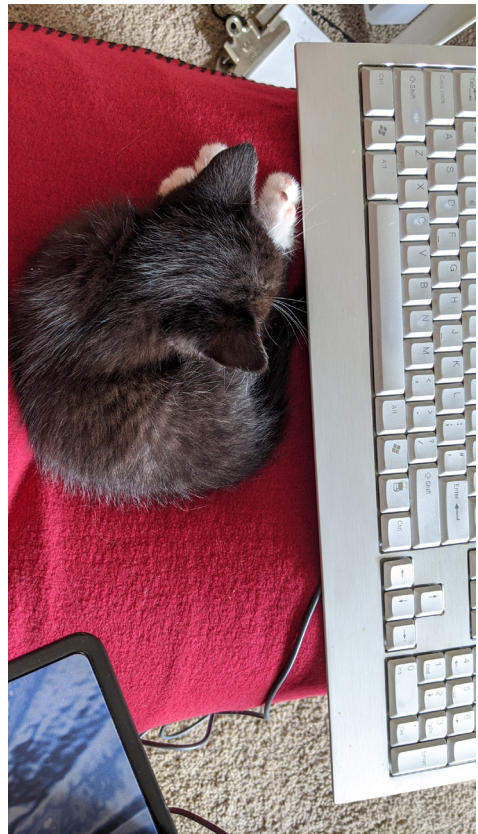


Image 9: A professor invited me to join her relaxing watch-my-kittens-play Zoom sessions for her students. Two months later, I sent a Teams message to library staff showing off my new laptop. Photo by Kathryn Floyd



Image 10: The dining room became my home office, complete with new monitor and desk clutter. Pants were optional. Photo by Michelle Spomer

Personal Lives

I have a very clear memory from early in the pandemic, after the seminary had shut down and I had heard a sobering report about how contagious COVID-19 was. I was at a gas pump, staring down at the black nozzle, and wondering whether or not I should touch it with my bare hands or find a napkin to use as a barrier. I must have stood there for two or three minutes, fretting over what to do. Little did I know that this was just the beginning of adjusting to disrupted schedules and new routines.

Just about all aspects of our lives were impacted by the pandemic in some way. Not only did this include pumping gas, but also parenting, political expression, special occasions, health care, shopping, and education, to name a few. We took neighborhood walks, drove down empty city streets, walked down grocery store aisles a certain way, missed vacations and funerals, took up new hobbies, homeschooled our children, and stockpiled toilet paper. And we washed our hands. A lot.

We also had time to reflect on ourselves, our employment, our family life, our faith, and many other important and personal aspects of our lives. Some of us struggled with anxiety and depression (Panchal, Saunders, and Rudowitz 2023). Others of us decided to leave our jobs and pursue new opportunities, or dealt with decreased hours and job loss (“COVID-19 Economy’s Effects” 2022). Many of us lost friends and loved ones without the chance to mourn them properly.

The photos included below represent a variety of experiences and encounters that some of us had in the earlier months of the pandemic. Some we would like to forget, and some we hope to continue.

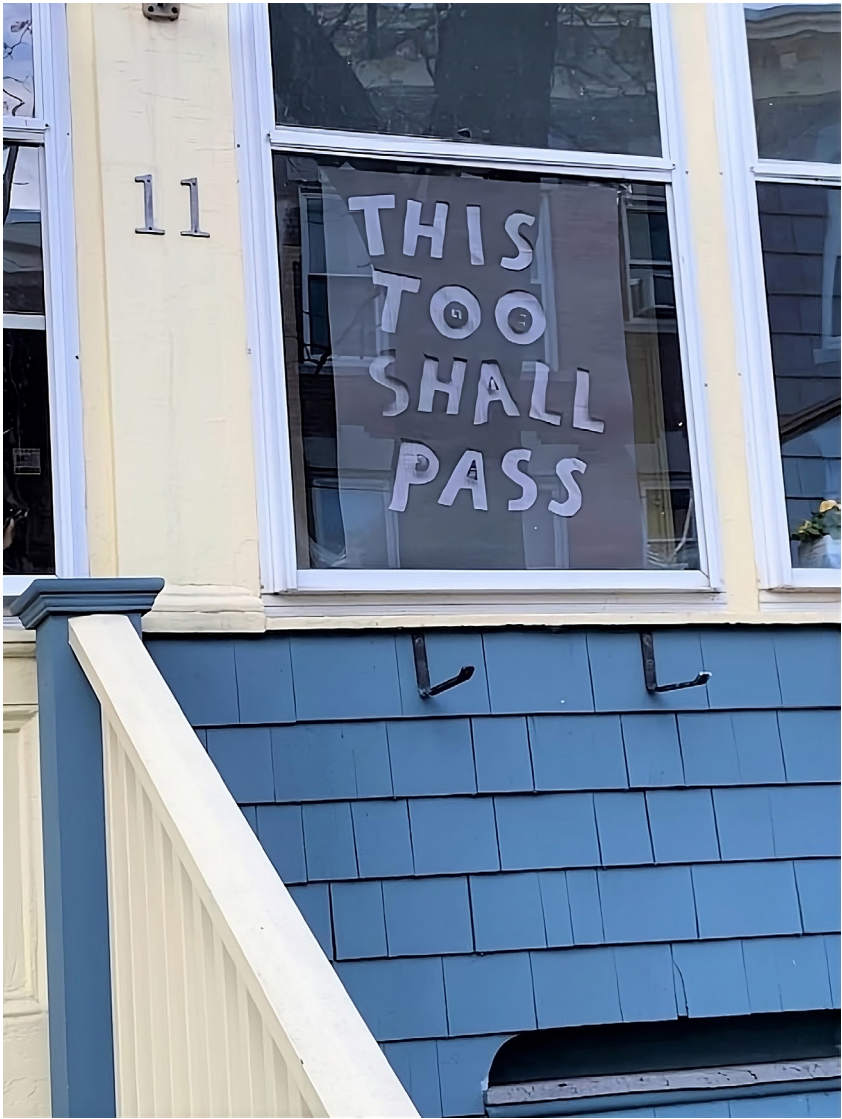


Image 11: This photo was taken on Tuesday, April 28, 2020, around 6:30 p.m. Working from home, the real highlight of my day was my daily walk around my neighborhood after I had finished working for the day. A lot of my neighbors posted signs of encouragement, and I particularly liked this one. Even though at that time I was not seeing anyone directly, it was good to know that we were all in this together – though apart – and to be reminded that even the bad times won't last forever. Photo by Amy Limpitlaw



Image 12: More perplexing to me than toilet paper shortages was the shortage of yeast in supermarkets everywhere. I scrounged message boards for news of where I could find this now seemingly 'hot' item. As with other families, life under quarantine allowed ours to reclaim life's simple pleasures like making homemade bread. Photo by Yasmine Abou-El-Kheir



Image 13: This photo was taken on July 4, 2020, in Wellfleet, MA on Cape Cod. Like many people, I was appalled by the tragic killing of George Floyd. During the summer of 2020, there were numerous demonstrations in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. Since I was spending that weekend on Cape Cod for the July 4 weekend with my 'pod' – my sister and brother-in-law (the only people I spent time with during the 2020 lockdown) – when I heard about this protest, I decided to attend even though I was nervous about catching the virus (at the time, we didn't yet know that transmission out of doors was unlikely). As you see, there are children and adults holding signs, and everyone is masked. Photo by Amy Limpitlaw



Image 14: During the pandemic, I took a lot of walks in my neighborhood. Although I live in a city (Boston), I discovered that there are a lot of wild animals in my neighborhood, including hawks, owls, turkeys (lots of turkeys!), rabbits, snakes, turtles, and geese! Photo by Amy Limpitlaw



Image 15: The pandemic was utterly devastating when it came to spending time with loved ones as they went into hospitals or other types of care facilities. Many were not able to have even a window visit, as this photo depicts. I feel fortunate to have been able to visit my Dad in his COVID isolation room. Photo by Michelle Spomer

Spiritual Lives

Many theological and religious studies librarians have active religious or spiritual lives, and a subset of these regularly attend in-person worship services. Some would say that the most isolating aspect of COVID-19 restrictions was the inability to be with others in their faith communities, and to participate in worship services. Religious leaders began to explore ways that their congregants could be together, both in person and online. People of faith looked for different ways to continue various ministries and activities.

Initially, worshipers continued to meet together and generally adhered to social distancing and masking guidelines. Some met outdoors, while others gathered inside, sometimes requiring signing in for contact tracing (a system by which people who attended an event together are alerted if an attendee has contracted COVID-19) and temperature checks. In Christian churches, some choirs were either singing while masked, or disbanded altogether. Communion was often presented in the form of a two-in-one wafer and juice set. Jewish leaders dissuaded congregants from kissing religious objects, such as prayer books (Silver 2020). In parts of the Muslim world, Friday prayers were suspended, pilgrimages were banned, and worshipers were asked to bring their own prayer mats (“Coronavirus is Changing” 2020).

Online worship and religious gatherings became one of the only ways to safely connect within faith communities, and this proved to be a catalyst for otherwise technologically-challenged leaders to hastily acquire online skills and equipment. However, many faith communities throughout the world could not afford this transition. Anthropologist Kathinka Frøystad points out that “many Hindu priests and gurus went online,” and then contrasts “the growing online presence of many prestigious Hindu temples with the inability of modest temples to follow suit” (Frøystad 2021, 16).

The photographs in this section portray both the practical pursuit of religious activity and hope in the midst of the pandemic. While some certainly lost their way or deliberately left their faith communities, still others saw their spiritual lives strengthened and renewed.



Image 16: At the beginning of the pandemic, when the weather was still warm, worship was held outdoors. Then the live-streamed online services got up and running, after which my husband and I would drive to the church and receive 'drive-thru communion.' It was not ideal, but I appreciated the ways in which our church staff innovated in meeting the needs of their parishioners. Photo by Michelle Spomer



Image 17: My wife and I have been involved with short-term mission trips to help Potter's House (Casa del Alfarero), a Christian relief and development agency our church partners with in Guatemala. Unfortunately, COVID put a hold on those trips, but we did it virtually for those two pandemic years! Much as we would for an in-person trip, we raised funds over the two years that enabled Potter's House to hire local masons to build a house for a family to replace their mud brick dwelling, build hygiene combo units to provide families with good, sanitary cleaning and cooking facilities, and provide food for school students and families in two locations. We were able to pray and interact with them in real time. Photo by Jeffrey Brigham



Image 18: During the pandemic I would come to the library twice a week to process the periodicals, and on one of those visits I caught our library, the Edward L. and Carrie E. Doherty Library, empty, but with a sign of hope – a beautiful rainbow. Photo by Victoria Brennan

Conclusion

One bright, sunny fall weekend, when it was just the right kind of chilly to go for a walk, I headed out to the Pittsburgh Botanic Garden. It was October of 2022, and many pandemic restrictions had been lifted by that time. As I strolled down wooded paths, breathing in the autumn air, I kept an eye out for photograph-worthy scenes and subjects. I was particularly intent on getting to the small meadow, which was lined with trees that, in theory, would be awash in the vivid colors of fall. But as I wended my way through the meadow, I saw that, for the most part, the trees at the perimeter were still greener than what I had imagined. Disappointed, I turned around to retrace my steps in order to take a different trail. My eyes widened when I saw that the meadow was full of blooming goldenrod. It was stunning. In my haste to get to the “money shot” of fall foliage, I almost missed the wonder of a field full of goldenrod.

Perhaps it is too much of a stretch to compare a field of goldenrod to our pandemic experiences. But there is a certain beauty in how we've made it through, in how we have persisted in the midst of a chaotic time, and in how we were wonderfully creative in so many ways. So as we push into this new era of fewer COVID-19 restrictions, different ways of doing things, and the reclamation of our traditions, I hope we can take the time to look back. We may be astonished and encouraged by what we see.



For more photographs from your colleagues documenting personal experiences of the pandemic, please visit the Atla Commons (<https://atla.ir.atla.com>).

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Further Reading

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