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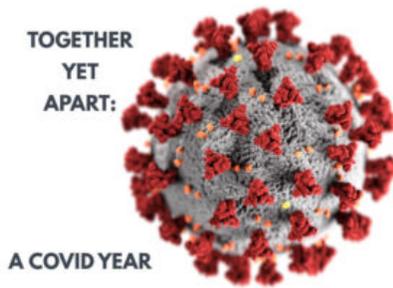
BEARINGS ONLINE

## Language to Get Us Through Covid-19

### A Covid Year

APRIL 29, 2021 BY CAROL YOUNGER LEAVE A COMMENT

Since the global pandemic began over a year ago, religious leaders have sought ways to support the larger community while providing for the needs of members of their congregations. For the next several weeks, we will publish pandemic stories from alumni of the Collegeville Institute's programs, both in the United States and abroad.



This, the final post in the series, was written by Carol Davis Younger of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn. The essay references the Collegeville Institute's [Communities of Calling Initiative \(CCI\)](#), which invites partner congregations to design new projects or enhance existing ministries to help Christians discover and deepen their sense of God's calling in their lives.

"Vocation" wasn't trending in Brooklyn when Plymouth Church joined the Collegeville Institute's Communities of Calling Initiative (CCI) a few years ago. "Work stress" was trending. "Work stress" is always trending.

During coffee hours after church, we talked about the job pressures that were keeping us awake at night. The underlying questions — the hunger many felt for a new purpose — were seldom spoken. We needed a new language to talk about our lives. At our first meeting with others in the Communities of Calling Initiative, we asked: What will help us discuss spiritual concerns in genuine ways? And how could we translate that desire into a three-year CCI project in our congregation?

"The meeting of the community of faith is a speech meeting," writes Walter Brueggemann in *Finally Comes the Poet*. "We gather for speaking and listening of an odd kind. That meeting has the potential of evoking a new humanity."

*Language, it turns out, is key to transformation.*

If churches thought of themselves as language schools, the Plymouth Church cohort asked, what would we do differently? What terms are too clichéd to translate and which ancient words are as

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relevant as today's *New York Times*? If we made the metaphors that enliven worship our own, what could they stir up at coffee hour? If we translated those words throughout the week, would we care more about strangers on the subway, or redirect the latest office conflict, or enliven the next dinner party?

*We needed a new language to talk about our lives.*

Could Plymouth Church be a language school that equipped our congregation with new ways to talk about meaning? We Googled language schools to discover how they work, reflected on how students grow fluent in unfamiliar dialects, and as a result of this research had an answer when we were asked: "What are you doing for your CCI project?"

Since listening is key to fluency, we spent the first year honing our listening skills. We listened for the Spirit in a fall retreat and listened to Scripture by practicing *lectio divina* in Faith Ed. We listened for God in a book of short stories. We listened when [Diane Millis](#) told us how conversation becomes a sacred art. We listened to one another's vocation stories, then listened for what response would help the speaker discern their calling.



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Since conversation partners are essential to learning a new language, twelve Lenten small groups in our church gathered around vocational interests, themes, and usually food. Using "What Are We Talking About?" as the theme, Sunday worship services would consider the relationship between a particular word and a faithful life: "What Do We Mean When We Say...Serve? Family? Welcome? Rich? Worship? God?" The words were springboards for conversation. Lawyers ate breakfast and talked about serving. Writers shared their work and

egg casserole. Racial justice advocates reflected over Sunday lunch. Artists blended *lectio* with watercolors around a dining table. Groups told stories, considered what makes a place home, undertook community service, prepared dinner together, danced after discussing how to age well, walked around a park, practiced discipleship, built community, and explored what it means to lead. The response was joyous. Language school was on a roll. For two weeks. Until Covid-19 hit New York.

A few groups moved online when our worship services did, but the shock we were experiencing dominated conversation. The growing intensity of the coronavirus in NYC led families to scatter. Forty percent of people in our church's neighborhood were now living elsewhere. As we distanced from one another and mourned losses, we learned that grief comes in varied shapes and sizes. Plans changed. Fears threatened. Projects ended before their hopes were fully realized.

Constructing the second year of language school felt shaky. Calendaring an unforeseeable future seemed pointless. Year One used cozy dining rooms, large coffee urns, and in-person conversations to strengthen connections between our faith and daily life. Year Two traded Language 101 for the intensive Language Immersion experience where you ask what you must know to survive. "How do you say, 'Where am I?'"

*Forty percent of people in our church's neighborhood were now living elsewhere.*

In the new landscape of altered religious routines, we ask: What are the essentials that will sustain us? How can the church offer those now? How does grief become a prayer of lament that strengthens the soul and leads to hope? How do we exercise creativity in a season of despair? How will we rise to

meet the crises of hunger and injustice rising around us? How does God help a distanced congregation live out its call to be the body of Christ?

“Words from the Cross” was not just our church’s theme for Lent this year; it is essential vocabulary for wrestling with questions about forgiveness, mortality, eternity, family, doubt, thirst, purpose, and trust. Small groups gathered on Zoom to discuss subjects such as lament, protest, racial justice, storytelling, and creativity. Leaders felt a kind of urgency as they prepared for Lenten groups this year. We have traded large tables for Zoom screens, with no coffee urn in sight. What is visible in the faces that appear online is the desire to talk about the things that matter most. Our conversations now extend beyond what we do for work. Instead, we discuss what our community is being drawn to be and do during this singular, pandemic year.

This is not the language school we dreamed of, but it is the language school we needed.

[Read other pandemic stories in this series »](#)

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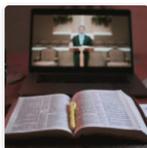
### Carol Younger

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