

March, 2021

# The Epistle

The Newsletter of the United Presbyterian Church  
of Cedar Grove, NJ

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*“No one after lighting a lamp  
puts it under the bushel basket,  
but on the lampstand,  
and it gives light to  
all in the house.” (Matt. 5:15)*

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## Strong Communities Have Fewer COVID-19 Cases

**A new study suggests that COVID-19 infection and death rates are lower in communities where people trust each other and feel more connected.**

BY DR. JILL SUTTIE | MARCH 9, 2021

The United States has been particularly bad at managing the coronavirus outbreak. Among the nations of the world, we currently have the fifth highest number of deaths per 100,000 people, with over half a million dead from the virus and counting.

Yet the effects of COVID-19 have not been evenly distributed across the country. Some communities are faring better than others, both in terms of viral spread and death. Some research suggests that a community's population density, health care capacity, and leadership around promoting mask-wearing and physical distancing all make a difference, among other factors.

Now, a new study suggests another important community resource for fighting the pandemic: social capital, the network of relationships within a community. According to the study, counties where people trust each other more, feel more connected, and care for each other more have lower infection rates and fewer deaths from COVID.

For the study, researchers Christos Makridis of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Cary Wu of York University in Toronto compared over 2,700 counties spread across the United States,

representing a variety of communities with different characteristics. Their data for infection and death rates came from a report put out by Johns Hopkins University tracking the virus.

For social capital, they used data from two large surveys that looked at elements considered by the Joint Economic Committee to be essential to social capital, such as stable family structures, trust in social institutions, and how much people vote, volunteer, help out their neighbors, and more. They also looked at basic demographic information, such as the racial composition of a community; the average age, education level, and income; the population density; and whether it is rural or urban—all factors that could influence the results.

Accounting for these factors, they found that communities with higher social capital had lower infection and death rates from the virus. Specifically, counties in the top 25% of social capital had nearly 18% fewer cases of COVID-19 and 5.3% fewer deaths from COVID-19 per 100,000 people than those in the bottom 25%.

Makridis believes that there is a good reason why this might be the case.

“Individuals that trust each other more and respect one another more are probably going to maintain better hygiene and not take unnecessary risks,” he says. “While that’s maybe not too surprising, it’s important to make the point in a quantitative way.”

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## How social capital might help

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To look more carefully at how different kinds of communities fared during the pandemic, Makridis and Wu performed additional analyses. They found that in lower-income communities, social capital seemed to matter more for preventing viral spread than it did in prosperous communities—possibly because wealthier communities have better health care, healthier food supplies, and more people able to work at home, all of which are protective during a pandemic, Makridis says.

More densely populated areas also seemed to need social capital more as they fought the virus than less densely populated areas, which means caring for others is important there, too.

**Trust Is Important Glue During Crises. Going Forward, Communities Should Be Trying To Capitalize on Their Social Connections.**

“The more that norms and trust encourage smart behavior, and the more that people in a community can be kind and loving of one another, the more they’ll be able to mitigate the transmission of the virus without extra resources [or in spite of crowding],” he says.

Makridis and Wu also considered which aspects of social capital mattered in the face of COVID-19. They grouped elements of social capital into categories: family unity (how stable family ties are), community health (the health and available health care in a community), institutional health (how much people trust institutions and participate in things like voting or the census), and collective efficacy (how much people help each other, volunteer, participate in community activities, etc.).

While community health was strongly connected to a reduced impact of the virus, and family unity also played a role, the second most important factor was collective efficacy—the ability of a community to come together in common cause.

“Obviously, community health is going to be important in a pandemic—if a county doesn’t really have good public health infrastructure, there’s not much you can do to avoid the spread of the virus and extra deaths,” Makridis says. “But norms and trust are important glue during crises, too. As far as I know, we were the first to make this point as it relates to the coronavirus pandemic.”

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## Protecting communities in the future

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This suggests that communities should be trying to capitalize on their social connections. But that’s hard during a lockdown, of course. While sheltering in place may have been effective at slowing the spread of the virus, Makridis worries that it could have unintended consequences on a community’s

long-term social and economic well-being. For example, he points to how lockdowns have decimated the child care market in many places, which will be hurtful to families when the economy reopens.

He believes that civic leaders should think more broadly about the impact of policies created to fight against the pandemic. Preserving social capital is important, he says, because it can help a community's response to the virus.

"Because of the role that social capital plays, you can mobilize support and mobilize actions at a local level, even if it's not happening at a federal level," he says.

He points to a growing body of research showing that social capital helps communities prevent and recover from disaster, including other epidemics, such as the ebola outbreak. He believes his paper is the first to suggest that social capital matters for slowing the viral spread and death from COVID-19, too.

Going forward, Makridis hopes to study how quarantine policies have affected social capital within communities over this last year—to see if they have increased or decreased trust. He's also interested in how political partisanship and religiosity within a community affect social capital.

Unfortunately, our current political divide has been a major obstacle to building social capital and, therefore, getting through the pandemic, he explains. If we could listen to each other without rancor and start from a place of caring for one another, says Makridis, we would be so much further along in this fight.

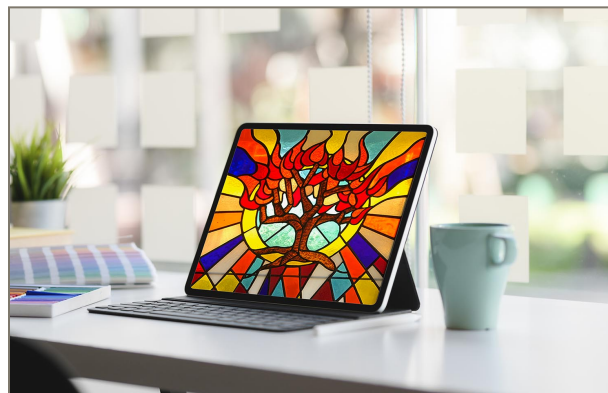
"It might seem really simple and common sense, but it's worth repeating: If you love one another, that's the starting point," he says. ■

## Moving Forward

We know we have experienced one of the craziest times of our lives and hope we can stay together while we are a part. Do you have an idea for a team activity we can do together? Something you want to do as a Bible Study (or video study as Pastor Todd has thought of)? Something we can do as a community for Cedar Grove? Any suggestions at all for us? Please let a Session member know and we will be happy to explore our options and make it happen!

## First Ever VIRTUAL Annual Meeting

Thank you to everyone who stayed on after our February 7th worship service for our first ever virtual annual meeting. It was a strange but successful way to share the happenings of our church over the last year and we got the job done. Thank you to everyone who helped make it possible. Looking forward to another great year ahead and hopefully some in-person gatherings soon!



# One Great Hour of Sharing

Growing up I remember being excited to be handed the specially shaped boxes to collect our change during the Lenten season. The fish shape stands out in my memory very well. It was such an accomplishment as it began to fill up and finally, be so heavy I had to support it from the bottom as I carried it into church on Easter Sunday. It was great to be able to save the loose change for families and hungry mouths in need.

2021 is a little different. I know we have not had the boxes in some time and having change lying around is less common these days. However, the number of families in need and hungry mouths is even greater now. We at UPCCG want to increase our support for the Human Needs Food Pantry in order to help those in need in our community. We feel it is so important to make sure families can feed and nurture their children and have access to the essentials they need to do so. This is the purpose of the Human Needs Food Pantry, which is why our church supports them with our mission giving.

This year, we ask that you try to keep a little jar of loose change or dollar bills that you can spare. At the end of Lent, try to donate to the Human Needs Food Pantry in some way. You can send items to them directly (such as their most needed items, listed below), or you can write a check for whatever you save and send the money to church where we will match all donations!

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***We have decided that all HNFP monetary contributions we receive by Monday, April 5th, will be matched dollar for dollar by the church.***

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***We have decided that all HNFP monetary contributions we receive by April 5th, 2021 will be matched dollar for dollar by the church.*** We will be sending a check to the food pantry during the week after Easter. We are grateful for any amount that you can spare for this mission!

If you choose to send food or goods instead, those are welcome, too. You can send them directly to HNFP, or you may add them to the boxes in the narthex for our ongoing collection.

**Here is a list of items HNFP is most in need of:**

- Canned goods and non-perishable food items (no glass jars please)
- Baby formula, diapers, and wipes
- Fresh produce and baked goods (only if it can be delivered ASAP)
- Feminine products
- Soap, napkins, cleaners, personal hygiene goods
- New sheets (Queen is most requested) and towels
- Dog and cat food (wet or dry) and litter

The Human Needs Food Pantry also has a wish list on Amazon that is updated regularly with their most needed items and it can be sent directly to them at any time. [You can find it online, by clicking here.](#)



## Easter Lilies

Another significant holiday is approaching... another holiday that will be celebrated from home. Over the years, in order to celebrate Easter and the arrival of springtime, we have traditionally made Easter Lilies available for people to order to be displayed in the church sanctuary in honor of or in memory of loved ones or a significant family event.

Since the pandemic and the suspension of in-person worship means we cannot carry out our usual Easter Lily ordering, we want to propose something new.

This year, we would like to put together a tribute video to honor an occasion or to remember those we cannot be with – whether through death or social distance – and show the video during the Easter online worship service. Typically, the lilies would cost the church \$15 or so. This year, if you would like to remember a special someone or a special event, we are asking for a donation of \$10 per memory. Also, can text or email a picture of the person or people (or place, thing...) to include in the video tribute. Lastly, we're asking you then buy a plant, tree, or flowers and plant it in honor of the memory you shared. Then we can watch the flowers grow and bloom with us – reminding us of their importance in our lives.

If you would like to participate, please send the money as you would normally donate (a check to the church through the mail, or by donating online), and email a picture to Todd or Jamie Lynn. **Get your pictures in BEFORE Tuesday, March 30. Please make sure you mention who or what is in your picture!** If you do not have email, you can drop a picture off to Jamie Lynn or at the church and we will scan it in. The money will then be put aside in our mission giving account and used throughout the year for those in need.

Let us know if you have any questions and Happy Easter!

## Gathering for Worship Online

### Community and Communion on Zoom

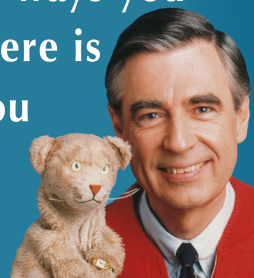
As our community life is transformed in many ways, we are so grateful that we are able to worship each week via Zoom networking.

As you know, Session has suspend “in-person worship” until further notice. We will hold worship services online each Sunday at our usual gathering time of 10:00am. Invitations with the details for attending both the worship services and the weekly check-ins are sent out each week. Further information about our online worship gatherings, and recordings of previous gatherings, can be found on the [church website](#).

Our zoom gatherings allow folks to participate via desktop computer, laptop, smartphone with audio and video. A dial-in number is also available if you prefer to participate by telephone. I invite you to follow the [United Presbyterian Church of Cedar Grove Facebook page](#) and tune in each week.



"If you could only sense how important you are to the lives of those you meet; how important you can be in ways you may never even dream of. There is something of yourself that you leave at every meeting with another person." Mr. Rogers



*The Epistle is a monthly publication of  
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**The United Presbyterian Church  
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