

Interview with Reverend David Huber by Sam Zehms

Interviewee: Reverend David Huber

Interviewer: Sam Zehms

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Abstract: Reverend David Huber has been the pastor of Plymouth United Church of Christ in Eau Claire, Wisconsin since 2004. In this interview, David details the impact of COVID-19 on his life with a particular focus on his work, interactions with friends, the Eau Claire community, and politics. He shares how the pandemic has changed his role as a pastor, such as changing how in-person pastoral care is approached and having to learn skills and laws associated with online streaming. David emphasizes his frustrations towards those who are “anti-science”, highlighting state and national GOP members in particular. Within the interview, David also discusses how the pandemic has led to him spending more time talking with friends every week, which he considers to be a “wonderful blessing”.

Sam Zehms (SZ): My name is Sam Zehms, and I'm conducting an oral history interview as a part of an effort to archive the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals and communities in the Midwest for both the Chippewa Valley COVID-19 Archive, and the Journal of the Plague Year COVID-19 Archive. This recording is being conducted on November 28th, 2020; it is approximately 9:14 a.m. Central Time. Both interviewer and interviewee are participating via Zoom from their respective homes. Worldwide, 441,157 new cases were confirmed, bringing the total to 61,787,692. Additionally, there were 9,310 reported deaths, bringing the total to 1,445,541. Nationally, there are a total of 1,388 deaths due to COVID-19, bringing the total to 264,724 deaths. There are also 199,104 newly confirmed cases, bringing the total to 13,153,428 COVID-19 cases in the United States. In Wisconsin, there were a total of 13 new deaths due to COVID-19, bringing the total to 3,444 deaths. There were also 1,453 new cases reported, bringing the total to 399,557 cases in Wisconsin. Thank you for taking time with me to talk today and sharing your experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

David Huber (DH): You're welcome, happy to do it.

SZ: So, to start off with, what is your name, and do you mind sharing some demographic information for this study?

DH: I am Reverend David Huber. I'm a pastor in Eau Claire serving a United Church of Christ congregation. I am a white male. What else do you want? 50-54? Am I 54? Yep. 54 years old, as you can tell, I'm awfully white-

SZ: [chuckles]

DH: -and I am a male.

SZ: What are the primary things you do on a day-to-day basis?

DH: Depending on how specific you want to be, my day-to-day life is that of a pastor. But are you looking for what a pastor might [chuckles] specifically be doing-

SZ: Generally so, if you wouldn't mind.

DH: -or is that good enough? Okay, I-part of-part of what I do, and I guess we're looking for things beyond a job as well. So part of-there's preparing for worship, which in this time of pandemic, now we're doing virtual worship, so there's also been learning how to use video-video editing software, video cameras, microphones [chuckles] that's-that a lot of things that-that pastors don't normally need to know to-to do their jobs. So there's been just some ramp up of learning a lot of new skills, but also continuing pastoral presence with people who are sick. I've had some people that have had COVID, had some people have had other surgeries, cancers, things going on, so provide a presence of-of healing with them. I've also been working with-there's a JONAH [Joining Our Neighbors Advancing Help], which is a local organization of religious groups. Joining Our Neighbors Advancing Help is JONAH, and they have a COVID response team that I've been on as one of the kinda clergy reps for that. So we've been meeting a lot just trying to get information out into the community, into the faith communities and in the community in general about COVID issues, safety issues, testing resources that are available, and so on. And do reading, writing, try to keep up with some magazines and some theological writing and whatnot. And-and then extracurricular activities-not been a whole lot of them during the pandemic because not a lot of places to go to [chuckles]. And usually my-my extracurricular is going out to-going to plays and going to concerts and so a lot of those have been put on hold. And I sing in a choir in town, Schola Cantorum, which has kind of been on hold, although a few of us met for a couple of months on Sunday afternoons and met outside, sang, and we did a couple concerts in-in people's yards back in October [coughs]. So that was really nice. And then with the beauty of this Zoom technology, been able to get together with some friends and we have a-a weekly Dungeons and Dragons game that we are able to play over Zoom. So I got a friend in Oshkosh, and one in Janesville, one in Fort Atkinson, one of Madison and me.

SZ: A-

DH: And-and I've also found during the pandemic part of my-my day-to-day activities is doing an awful lot of dishes. Eating three meals at home every day [chuckles]. I'm amazed at how many more dishes I do now.

SZ: Would you mind telling me a little bit more about what it's like to live in Eau Claire?

DH: Hmm. What is it like to live in Eau Claire?

SZ: Maybe a little bit-what's the city like?

DH: Yeah. I-I would say the city is a, well for Wisconsin, a larger city, 65,000. In some ways, it's a smaller city because we're not really big enough to be [uses finger quotes] "Metropolitan". Although people do talk of the metropolitan Eau Claire area. Which for Northern Wisconsin, I mean, we are [laughs]. We are the metropolis. But yeah, it's-it's a city-it's a university city as

well. Some manufacturing, some industry, a lot of-a lot of creative arts, we have a lot of musicians, dancers, artists. The arts are real strong in town, I think partly being a-a university city helps with that. So it's not-it's not a huge city, by any means, but boy, there's a-in normal times, there's a lot of activity in the city in terms of concerts and plays and multiple-we have multiple theatre organizations and lots going on. And-and we have some wonderful recent grads of the university that have-that came to like Eau Claire and have really been helping to build it up. Jamf Software employs a couple of hundred people and they've built a nice building downtown, and have helped with the Pablo Art Center and building a lot of nice new apartments in the downtown area. And, you know, when I arrived here in 2004, downtown was kind of rundown. There were stores and stuff, but it just-it just wasn't-it wasn't a real interesting area. And in the time that I've lived here, there's been a lot of reclamation of the land along the river, and we got Phoenix Park-got a beautiful park there on the river, bunch of new buildings where there was just blight. We've got bridges there, the Pablo Art Center. Some of the old bridges have been fixed up or replaced. Bunch of-lot of new building, it's just-it's a-it's an exciting place in Eau Claire. There's a lot of neat stuff going on, a lot of young entrepreneurs. Our city council has a number of young people, and the county board that have really pushed a nice progressive agenda and making cool things happen. It's-it's a fun city to-to live in. And I moved here from-New York City, and of course it doesn't have everything New York City has because it's a hundredth of the population [chuckles], but-but it's-it has-you know, there's-there's more than enough art than one person could ever take in and-and some really nice, nice things going on. And it has its-its issues. There's a-a growing homeless population. Poverty is still an issue in the city, housing for low income people is almost nonexistent. And we're trying to fix it, but one of the-one of the side effects of growth and gentrification is that it also pushes poor people-poor people out and-and causes a lot of havoc for them. So there's always a bit of a tightrope on-on doing that. And mostly Eau Claire is a-a pretty friendly city, safe city. We have some crimes, not a lot of crime. Generally nice, couple of rivers, beautiful, lots of parks. Very family-family friendly. Hope that's okay, I know this is your hometown.

SZ: [chuckles]

DH: I don't want to-I don't want to trash it on ya [sips drink].

SZ: When-

DH: [clears throat]

SZ: To change gears just a bit, when you first learned about the COVID-19 pan-well, at that time, just COVID-19 in general, what were your thoughts about it, and have your thoughts changed since then?

DH: Hmm. Well I remember-I remember first hearing about it when it was just kind of starting in China when Wuhan was having a lot of issues, and there was this this wondering, "Is this something that's going to go around the world or not? Is it confined there? What's-what's going on?" And-and of course, there's always, oh, maybe I shouldn't say of course, but at least for me and for others, there's the thought like, "Oh, is this a biological weapon that's gotten out of hand?" Having started in China, you know, some countries, depending on where it is, that thought comes into one-one's head. And-and also thought, "How well are they really going to contain it?" And given the-the information wall that China has put around itself, too, there-there's always that

concern, how much information that's coming out, how much of it is accurate? And what percentage of what we ought to be knowing is actually making it out? But then, you know, as-as the news get worse, coming out of-coming out of China, then I had the re-or at least had the thought, like, "Okay, if they are hiding something it's gotta be really bad, because what they're telling us is really bad [chuckles]." So there was-there was-some of my, I don't know, my paranoia, maybe, went down and like, okay, I-it seems like they're being fairly honest. And then as-as it started traveling around the world and we saw other places get it, then I-I kind of was like, "Okay, this is- this is going around the world." And-and I'm like, "It's going to come to the United States, someone's going to bring it in, or some group of people with all the plane travel especially." It's just so-these things can travel so quickly, around the world. Unlike the old days when people traveled by ships, and it took months, or weeks, or months, to get anywhere. Now you can-you can be in China in the morning and be here in the afternoon. So you can-you could bring 800 people in one flight who might have an infection, or bring them from Europe, or-or whatever. So there was this-I was like "Okay, this is really going to go around the world." And then I'm wondering-I've read about the old plagues: the smallpox, and the-the plague of the-the 19-the swine flu, whatever-whatever that was in the in the 19-1918, 1920. I can't remember now. But, you know, the Black Plague and all these European plagues you hear about it and just how ugly it is and like, "Oh, this is gonna be my first-my first plague [chuckles]. What is this-what is this going to be like?" And also to be-I also gotta be really, totally honest here, having [Donald] Trump as president and knowing how anti-science he is, and how anti-science so many of our GOP senators and legislators are, and state governors, and-and the state legislature in Wisconsin, I-there was a lot of fear that they would not take it seriously, and that it would just spin out of control in this country. I really had the hope that it wouldn't; that maybe, because this is so deadly, maybe they would give up some of that rhetoric, and as we've seen, they didn't. And so there's been a lot of-a lot of mishandling, and I-I really-I had wished at the time, I'm like, "I know that sounds really cynical and I hope I'm wrong." But unfortunately, I wasn't. But I had a lot of fear coming into this just wondering "Is the United States going to take this seriously?"

SZ: S-are there any particular issues, or issues in particular, that have concerned you the most about the COVID-19 pandemic?

DH: Th-the biggest issue for me is just simply the number of people that are dying from it, and the number of people getting sick, and that they are numbers that are far higher than they should have been. If we had simply gone into some kind of lockdown, you know, and-and-and if the-the Republicans in say, Wisconsin, hadn't constantly fought our governor against [clears throat] some of the things he wanted to do to help the spread, so I'd-so the-the-the issue of people getting sick and people dying, I just don't-I don't want to see any unnecessary sickness or unnecessary deaths. I just-I want people to-to live and-and to have good lives. So that's, I mean, that's-that's the issue, but the side issue of that is-is this issue that we have so many people who have simply refused to be safe or to allow safety precautions to be put into place. So you've got this virulent and deadly virus going around, and-and then you've-you've got this other, one could almost say it's also a virus, of the anti-science virus, or this personal liberty over community safety kind of virus, just this lot of bad stuff. And some bad theology. People saying "Well, God will protect us. I'm a believer, so God is gonna keep me safe," which really is just nonsense. Believers die constantly, there is no special protection from God from viruses. Viruses don't care what your faith is, or what your nationality is, or-or anything else. I-so that's, I-I think one of the biggest issues f-for me has-has been the amount of-of just unnecessary death and sickness. And

seeing too, I, you know, our health care workers, you know, starting with Dr. [Anthony] Fauci who's been trying to be the voice of reason in all this, but even down to our local hospitals around here with the health care workers saying to people "Please wear masks, don't get together for Thanksgiving, stop these large gatherings, you know, limit the number of people in restaurants and bars." And they're begging us to do stuff because they're swamped, they're overworked, they're running out of beds. A-and the fact that-that so many people just won't listen is-is really bothersome

SZ: Before you mentioned that-

DH: [sips drink]

SZ: -COVID-19 has affected your job in many different ways, such as learning, you know, video re-recording software they didn't necessarily need to know before. Other-are there any other ways that it has, you know, substantially changed your job?

DH: The-the biggest change I-I think is-is that normally [clears throat] if people are in the hospital, I go visit. Not been able to do that. Or if people are at home, I can't go visit. I usually will visit our people that are in the nursing homes, and shut-ins, you know, there's been no personal visitation so it's a lot of ministry by-by phone. For those that have-that have the tech some-sometimes it's Facebook Messenger, or texts, or talking to people on Zoom like this as well. So it's-it's been-it's been all sort of not in-person pastoral care, which is-which has been really strange. There were some people in the church that were already pretty comfortable with only doing it by text or Facebook who didn't want to do the in person stuff, and so at least I'd gotten kind of used to that. And some people were used to it, but to-to have it reduced to only that now has been strange. And then also I've had a number of deaths and done some funerals. And it's also just been really weird, to-to be doing these small 10 person, 20 person funerals, doing services at the-at the grave site instead of in a funeral home or the church just because it's safer to-to do it outside. And then to also-to spend this time with a grieving family, but not be able to shake hands or offer a hug or it's-it's just-that feels even more impersonal then doing it by text in some ways to be standing in front of someone and just go "Hey, I offer you I my condolences" but [chuckles] maintaining that physical distance, it feels way more standoffish than-than normal. It's like, "Yeah, I'm willing to get this close to you." But I-and I just, I always feel guilty for it, but I mean, we all know why it is. So there is no guilt, but it just feels so strange. Just to-even just not to shake hands is-is really different. So that's-that's been a-a big change. And then having to figure out how to do worship as a recording and to-to do it online. And-and we had gone to in-person worship for a while, back in July, and we had bought equipment so we could do the online streaming. So then I had to learn how to-how to stream it to YouTube, how to stream it to Facebook so we could broadcast our live-our live worship, and now we're doing all by recording and we got music. So now for the last couple of weeks I've been doing seminars on copyright, copyright law, and licensing and doing a lot of reading and Lynn, [McFadyen] our pianist, has done some of those with me as well so we can make sure that we're not broadcasting music illegally [laughs]. It's just-these things that you don't really, at least that I had never had to-to really think of before. And now it's like, every time we want to do some music in worship we've got to look it up, see-because we just-we can only afford one-one broadcast license and, you know, to cover it all would take five or six and-so it's just "Okay, what music do we have access to?" So Lynn [McFadyen], our pianist, is looking at stuff. And she calls the secretary, "Do we have permission for this piece to do broadcast? Nope? Okay, let me go back to the [chuckles]

drawing board. How about this piece? How about this piece? How about this one? How about if I just play the music and don't do the words? Okay, that we can do, we can do the music, no words [laughs]." So there's been a lot of learning there, and then I'm also-I'm on the board for our Stand in the Light dementia choir, so also dealing with a lot of copyright issues also with that choir as we've been doing things. And I'm with another group that does podcasts and radio shows that involve music, so there's-there's been a lot of-a lot of new learning there. And then also, like, with the dementia choir, trying to adjust to not being able to do it in-person, and we've been doing choir by Zoom and some other electronic ways. You know, it's just such a-a-a learning curve, just so many different things that I don't normally, or would not normally, be doing that have come up because of-because of COVID. And I think the-the biggest one is probably just the-the not seeing people in person. It's been really weird. And then sometimes the things like, "Wow, I could almost do this job from Hawaii. Really? Maybe [chuckles]." Not that I would, but it was like "Yeah I-yeah there could be a lot of potential for ministry in the future." That maybe-yeah, maybe there could be more virtual ministries. And-and I've heard now from some clergy friends that they're-because they are broadcasting their services, because it's on the internet, they're getting people, you know, getting calls from people like in New Mexico or something. They're like, "Hey, I've been watching your services, I'd like to be a member." Some of the questions like, "Well how do you-alright, how do we do church membership that's maybe only virtual, where these members live far away and may never actually physically be present, but really like the preaching, or the worship service, or the ministry that the congregation is doing in their-in their location." So that's-that's created some new-new avenues of theological thought and, you know, what-what is the church if it's online, and where is-where is the church? It's kind of exciting.

SZ: Do you have any concerns about the effects of COVID-19 on your employment and the economy more broadly? What might they be?

DH: Oh. So far in terms of my job, specifically, there's been no-no threat to it or-or anything. The people of-of Plymouth [Plymouth United Church of Christ] have continued their generous giving, so we're-we're not in any-we haven't taken any financial downfalls or anything, and in fact our giving this year is higher than it's been in years which has been really nice to see, and-and it's something I really wish I knew why. And I'm not-I just don't know. I-other clergy friends I talked to, there are some that also are seeing higher than normal levels of giving. But I also know that in a lot of churches, the giving has plummeted, and quite a few clergy are really worried about their ability to stay as pastors in that congregation or even have the congregations to continue. So it's kind of jus-and I don't know-I don't know why, you know, why is our giving up while other churches are down or-I really wish I-I had answers to that but-so through this I've not ever felt like my position is-is being threatened. I-if this goes on, I mean, who knows how long, you know, God forbid this goes on for another year or two things might be different, but hopefully it won't. We got vaccines that appear to be kind of right around the corner. But thankfully, personally speaking, it hadn-it hasn't really affected me financially. And I've also found out that now that I-now that I'm home and cooking so much, even though I'm doing a lot more dishes, I-I've been able to save more money because I'm not-it's-it's made me think things like "God, how much money was I spending on these [finger quotes] 'quick' convenient lunches [laughs]?" Just going out to eat for something or-or being out driving and go "Ah, maybe I should step into Target because maybe I need something." I'm just not doing any of that sort of unintentional shopping and like, "Wow, I've got more disposable income than I used to. Maybe I

need to really evaluate my spending habits.” But I do worry about the-the greater economy. We've seen small businesses have taken a hit, restaurants have taken hits, movie theaters, I really worry about the mom and pop kind of stores. It-it seems like, at least here in the Eau Claire area, a lot of the stores have-have adjusted to getting an online presence so people can still buy stuff from them and doing curbside delivery and the restaurants seem to have adjusted, although I'm sure we've lost some-some businesses. But I really-I do worry this is-this is gonna have some lasting effects. We've got Disney's laying off tens of thousands of people, and Hollywood's been mostly shut down and, you know, we-we've had some-had some issues there. But on the other hand, the-the Dow [Jones Industrial Average] keeps going up. Not that the Dow [Jones Industrial Average] is a perfect signifier of-of how the economy is doing, but there's still some good news to think that at least Wall Street's feeling a sense of hope in the future, that they keep driving prices up on the stocks so, I dunno. We'll see. And-and during this time, you know, difficult and tough times bring out people's creativity and ingenuity too, so there could be a lot of new tech that comes out of this time and new industries.

SZ: You mentioned before some ways that COVID-19 has affected-

DH: [sips drink]

SZ: -your day-to-day activities, such as for job, you know, a lot more virtual meetings a lot more contacting via text, Messenger, Zoom. But has-are there any other ways you'd like to mention that it's affected what you do every day, you know, aside from a lot more cooking as well?

DH: [chuckles] Ah, well another-I'd say one-one effect, doing so much virtually, and I still-the church-our church office is still open a couple hours in the morning. So I-I do try to be in the church for those two hours or-or so that we're open when I can. But even so, I'm still doing most of my meetings from home, and-and most of my work from home sitting basically where I am sitting now talking to you. And I have found that that over the months whereas, like the group that I work with for the county, we always met in the county building. My Citizen Action work, Citizen Action has its own office, and I'm part of a community of practice with a bunch of other UCC [United Church of Christ] clergy in the area, and we always met at First Con [First Congregational United Church of Christ] downtown. And, you know, this other group would meet at this church and this other group meets at this other church. So there was-I was moving around. So like, “Oh, all my county stuff is being done in this building.” Like, “Everything for this group is always being done in this building.” And having that separation made it-I think, made it easier to keep things separate. But now that every meeting I'm looking at the same view, there-there isn't that sense of like, “Oh, well, when I talked about that, I remember, you know, we were around the-the large board table down at the Health and Human Services office [clears throat].” Or “Oh, I was looking out the window at-at First Con [First Congregational United Church of Christ] when I had that conversation.” And just-some of those visual cues are just not there, so it can be really hard to keep track of-makes it more difficult, I think to keep track of stuff. Plus, just the stress and anxiety of pandemic as well has made it a little more difficult to-to really keep track of-of what's going on. And-And also without-without having that-that kind of-the weekly routine that I used to have of going to different places, that also helped me keep track of time. And keeping track of time has been really hard. I-I-I have A-Amazon Echo. I won't say her name, or she'll beep now. But, I just-I always have to start my days asking “What day is it? Are we on Wednesday, or is it Thursday today? I can't remember. Where are we in the week,

[chuckles] and what's on my calendar?" I feel like I've-I've just strayed from whatever your question was, because I don't remember what it was, but-

SZ: No, it w-was, you know, how it's affected your day-to-day activities. I think that's-

DH: Yeah, I-I think that-that's part of it, and-and, you know, I miss going out to coffee randomly with friends, or having friends over for supper. Used to-I mean, I really-I like entertaining. I like having people over and cooking food for them, and-and-and that hasn't happened. Or having people over to watch a movie, or just going to someone's house for a meal [chuckles]. Just so much of that-of that part of my life is-is gone. I really felt it on Thanksgiving. Usually my sister and her husband come up and another friend will come over, so the four of us have had Thanksgiving together for quite a while and-and not this year. And that was weird. And Christmas is going to be a little bit weird, and-you know, I've been thinking the youth Christmas dinner: not gonna happen this year, and that's gonna feel really strange. So it's a lot of those little things that-that I-I really miss. Or just bumping into people randomly, you know, used to see so many people at the grocery store or other stores. But now that, for the most part, we're all only going out to buy stuff when we really have to, I'm just not seeing people out and about anywhere near as much as I used to either.

SZ: And you-talking before you know how, again, how you communicate, associate with others during this time, during the pandemic, have you noticed changes in regards to communicating and-and associating with families and friends? Such as the frequency, perhaps, and how often you talk with some?

DH: Yeah, in-in terms of family I would say that's-that stayed about the same. Talking with-at-at least reaching out to friends, say by video, or by Facebook, or text, I think that's gone up. Doing a little bit more of that than-than-than I used to and-and partly be-because I'm not seeing them out and about around town. You know, like-like the ones in town, there are people that I know that maybe we're not real close friends, but I would still see them once every month or two and could catch up. So now I find- reaching out to kind of, "Hey, how you doing?" Or other friends, especially ones that are-that are single that I know that live alone, just kind of contacting them, knowing that they're a little lonelier than maybe they usually are. There's been-well my weekly [clears throat] Dungeons and Dragons group is-is all friends I've had for 25 plus years. So we've seen each other way more this year than we have in the-since I moved out of Janesville in '92. We'd usually only see each other for a few hours at Christmas and that was it. Now we're going four hours pretty much every week. And kind of all of us together. You know, there's this group of five of us that-four of us went to high school together, so we've known each other for a long time, and the other one's a little bit newer. I've only known him 28 years. So he's the new-the new guy in the [laughs] group. It's just been-it's been really nice, and-and I-I really-you know I wonder if-if-if the pandemic had not come, would there have been that-that need for all of us to start playing games together again and-and get together this way? And-and maybe not because, you know, we're all-we're all kind of busy and into a lot of activities. But now that so many of our other activities are gone, we all actually have the free time to-to get together. And that's been-that's been just a wonderful, wonderful blessing. But in general, I would say it hasn't really increased, overall, how much I reach out to friends and family. Yeah. Which-and-and-yeah. Part of that is some self-condemnation. I've never been real good at reaching out to friends and family probably anywhere near as much as I should. It's just-that's just who I am, I've-I've come to accept that. I'm okay to talk to my sister once a month, even if she'd prefer once a week [laughs]

you know, or others like, “I'm sorry, not that I don't love you. I just-I just don't feel that need to be on the phone.”

SZ: What-out of all of the different challenges that we've talked about, and perhaps some we haven't, what would you say is the biggest challenge, or perhaps one of the biggest challenges that you personally have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic if you-?

DH: Hmm. Wow, that's-that's a really tough one. Because for me, nothing is a challenge.

SZ: [laughs]

DH: That's-that's so untrue. I-I-I think there's been two really-two-I would say two big challenges. One, I-I'm fairly introverted, so I've kind of been okay with the staying at home. And I've also lived alone for quite a while and gotten used to it and-so that that doesn't really bother me. So part of the challenge has been making sure that I don't get too comfortable with being home so much and forcing myself-get out, you know, go for a walk or as we just talked about, call someone, you know, check in on someone don't-don't just-to-to-to not just go into my cocoon of comfortable at home-ness, but to make sure that I'm still, at least in some way, engaging with the world outside of me. That's-that's been a challenge. It's a good challenge, but yeah, there-there are times I've just kind of had to force myself and-and I've-I've been doing walks with friends, which has been great, because a chance to talk to someone and also gets me out of the house and into some fresh air and-and get-get a little bit of exercise so-so that-that's-that's been a challenge. Yeah, thankfully just being at home itself has not been a challenge. Thank God. But another challenge goes-goes back to some of those other issues and-and problem around COVID with just the-the anti-science group. And sometimes the-the-the challenge has been, especially with Facebook being so convenient, to not just go on an angry rampage and say terrible [chuckles] things about people on Facebook, or letters to the editor, or whatever. I-I-you know, some of-the anger level sometimes it's just, it's so great at, what I see is-is this irresponsible behavior, this behavior of-of just so willingly putting other people in danger for no reason other than narcissism, and the complete failure of our president and some other of our national leaders to do anything to help in this. So-so managing the-managing the anger and the rage and not just blindly lashing out like I would like to. To become a Conan the Barbarian with the pen has been this incredible temptation [chuckles] for months. But I know that also doesn't help, to just go to rampage. So to try to-whenver I do voice my concerns, really try to put it in a theological framework, you know, put it in a theological cup and try to be a little more reasonable a-about it. But yeah, and-and as this has continued to go on, it's just-it's getting more and more difficult to contain that anger.

SZ: W-We did talk a little bit about what you've done for recreation during all of this such as, you know, going for walks, Dungeons and Dragons with your friends. Is there anything else that you've been getting into?

DH: You know, no. Not that I can think of. Yeah, a lot of-a lot of my need for creative output has-has gone into D and D [Dungeons and Dragons] because, I don't know if all your listeners will know what-what this is, but I've been the dungeon master for the group. So I'm the one creating the campaign and the scenario, so-so there's been a lot-I've been able to put a lot of creativity into that. Which is good, because I need to-I need to be creative. And-and I would normally probably have built an awful lot of Lego sets or done some other construction stuff in

this time, but I haven't. I've been thinking about it. I've got-I've got some sets that are waiting to be built, but I just find myself focusing [chuckles] on the Dungeons and Dragons that-that I keep playing. I'm looking at some of my Lego boxes that are on the other side of the room from me and I'm like "Yeah, I've got an International Space Station I was thinking of building this weekend." But hasn't happened [laughs] yet. Oh-so yeah, I've not done a lot of projects. I have caught up on a lot of reading I-before the pandemic I had-I had, I don't know, probably three stacks of magazines about this high on my coffee table of old *Christian Centuries* and *Christianity Today*, *Wired*, *The Nation*, a bunch of these that I just didn't have time to read. So actually, I've gotten through all of that pile, I think. There might be one more sitting on the table, but that's felt really good [chuckles] to get through all of those, but now I-I've also got a pile of books. I really thought that this time of pandemic would create a lot more time for reading, but just the amount of time required to get the basic work stuff done, you know, everything is taking two, three, four times longer to do than it-it ever did before, so there hasn't been quite as much reading time. But I would say overall, I've been very satisfied with the amount of creative output I've been able to have and kind of [finger quotes] 'me time', time to relax, and-

SZ: How has the COVID-19 outbreak affected your community, you know, everywhere from, you know, the church community, to the various other communities in the area that you're a part of?

DH: Hmm, well, for the church community, it's meant that we're not meeting for worship. Which also means that for a number of our people who do live alone, they're-you know, coming to worship was a really significant social occasion for them. And for some, that might be the only time during the week that they actually get to spend it with other people, other than going shopping or something. But yeah, that was the one kind of intentional time with other people. So that's-that's been taken away, and that's had an effect on some. And not all of our-our people have electronics. We do have a number of our older folks that don't have computers, so they have not-they've not been able to take part in our worship services. We still send them the bulletin, so they're getting a paper copy of the worship, but they're not hearing the sermon or they're not hearing the music. They're not getting to sing with the hymns and stuff, so-so just in the church community, that's been-that's been an effect. And-and within the greater community, you know, because we do have a lot of theater groups, a lot of choirs in town, a lot of other musical groups, a lot of those people have just not been able to-to get together to make their art, and that's-I've heard the-the lament of many of those people, or of the elderly people that aren't able to have their Sunday dinners with their family, or weren't able to leave their nursing home or assisted living even on Thanksgiving, you know, to-to not-not get that time. So some of the-the general kind of loneliness, sadness has been part of the community, and-and there's the economic hit and economic anxiety that businesses and restaurants have-have felt. And I know there's been a fair amount of anxiety in the city about paying rent. I've seen that working with JONAH [Joining Our Neighbors Advancing Help]. You know, low-income people already are just in danger and suffering, and many of them have lost their jobs or had their hours reduced, and they were already barely making it. So then they, you know, if they lose hours or lose income, then they're more than likely going to lose their housing. And we did have, at the beginning of the pandemic, there was the freeze on foreclosures and evictions. But that freeze is soon to end. And even-and even with the law saying that landlords can't evict you for not paying your rent [clears throat], it's not free rent, you know, hasn't been free rent this year at some point. It's got to get paid back. So people are piling up massive debt if they've not been able to pay their rent or pay all of it, you

know, so then it's at what point are they going to be able to pay that back and the-and the rent laws, at least far as I know, I don't think that's been changed. That's-that's only through the end of December. So starting in January, we could see a lot of people getting evicted and they're not gonna have anywhere to go. So that's gonna-that's gonna affect our-our community quite a bit. And not having the financial help that we need i-is going to have an effect and-and our-our hospitals are full. You know, folks are not getting surgeries or emergency room care that they need, just because the-there just aren't enough health care workers. And heard from friends of mine that work at Mayo [Mayo Clinic], that Mayo's [Mayo Clinic] been bringing in people from other states because our doctors and nurses here are either in quarantine because they're sick or in isolation because they've been exposed, or whatever. So that also has had an effect. We got to bring in health care workers to help manage things and-and-and just not having beds-beds available. I'm trying to think, we have a member of the church that was in the hospital here for a while, but they needed him to leave. I-I think he ended up having to go to Wausau or something, I-I could be-don't quote me on-on that one. But some issues of people-of just having to be taken 100 miles away to other hospitals because no beds left here. And-and not just Eau Claire, but I've heard of that happening in the Green Bay area and-and some others that there's just not space. Yeah. So that's a big effect. But we've also seen a lot of rallying together in the community. People have been very generous to Community Table and Feed My People and, you know, at least trying to get food and resources to those who need it. There-there's been a lot of rallying to-to help those who are suffering and-and who are stuck, and a big rally to try to remind us all that yeah, even though you're home, still try to eat one or two meals out every week to help the restaurants, you know, kind of spend-spend [chuckles] some money in town, please. Make sure our businesses are still around.

SZ: Speaking of, you know, making sure you eat out-eat out once or twice a week, have you seen the people around you change their opinions, day-to-day activities or relationships in response to the pandemic?

DH: Hmm. I don't-I don't know. I-I [exhales] most of the people that I know and hang out with, at least in this area, that took COVID seriously at the beginning still take it seriously. And I would say those that I knew, even if they're not from this area, but just other friends that I stay in touch with over Facebook and family, those that did not take it real seriously in the beginning, still seem for the most part to not be taking it too seriously. I-I don't know that I-I've seen a lot of switch, one way or the other. The ones not taking it quite as seriously have been quieter I think, lately, have not been speaking quite so vehemently against wearing masks and others. And I don't know if that's because they're changing their mind and they don't want to admit it online, or if they just got tired of saying it, or if they had enough people speak back against them that they're not saying it in public anymore. I-I-that I can't say what the reasons might be, but yeah. They do seem to have gotten quieter. And some of that could also just be that the rate of COVID now is-is so high that you have to be a real dyed in the wool COVID is a hoax person to maintain that position. Yeah.

SZ: One of the-two of the key ideas that have come from this pandemic are self-isolation and flattening the curve. How have you, your family, friends, community responded to requests to self-isolate and flatten the curve? And-

DH: Hmm. [clears throat] Well, we ceased worshipping in-person. We did that right away last spring and then when it seemed, you know, things were kind of a little safer in the summer so we

went back to in-person. But then as it-COVID was ramping out of control again, then we stopped the in-person. So we've-we've done that. I've been, in the church newsletters and sermons, have really been pushing: we wear masks, we self-isolate, we follow the directions of the scientist and-and we do that as followers of Jesus as an act of love for our neighbors, so we're not putting our neighbors in danger. This is to benefit everyone. Like I-I've said a number of times that, as Christians, we should be more concerned with doing what is right, than we are concerned with what our rights are. Yeah. And I can't quite think of all your-all your question, but I know at least with Plymouth [United Church of Christ] and the Plymouth [United Church of Christ] leadership, we've been real adamant about maintaining that safety and asking people to stay at home. You know, I've been doing that with my family. We decided not to get together for Thanksgiving, we won't be getting together for Christmas, we usually have a big family reunion in September. Some of the family wanted to do it; others of us didn't think it was safe. Thankfully, those of us who felt it was unsafe, and I think we're in the majority, so that ended up not happening, for which I'm glad, because probably what ended up with a lot of sick people after that. And it would have been a smaller reunion, because a bunch of us wouldn't have gone anyway. Yeah, and I've f-forgotten the-the fullness of your question there.

SZ: Just how, you know, how you, family, friends, and the community responded to self-isolating and flattening the curve? Has there been anything else that you've done, like, any sort of traditions you may have had that you've altered to help with flattening the curve and self-isolating?

DH: Oh, well, I-with the-the choirs. Going virtual like we did with the dementia choir [Stand in the Light Memory Choir], or with the other choir that I sing in we just had reduced numbers, did outside-or did rehearsals outside, did our mini concerts outside in people's yards with small groups instead of trying to do, you know, the concerts in churches like we normally would have done. That's been a change. Some other friends that normally-we might get together at each other's houses during the summer a couple times, we just got together in parks and had meals-shared a meal there, sitting apart from one another bringing our own food [laughs], not sharing. A couple of friends a little more paranoid about sharing food than I am, but-so there was-there was that adjustment. Yeah, I-I think just seeing friends in parks, instead of in homes or in coffee shops, was definitely a change. And-and thankfully, most of the people that I know, and-and those that I would call close friends that I associate with, all-all have realized the severity of-of COVID. So there hasn't been-haven't been any fights or getting into-I dunno, having that struggle with saying "I want to come to your house" and another having to say "I'm not comfortable having you in my house" and "Why not?" "Why would you?" And that hasn't been an issue. Thank God.

SZ: Have you or anybody you know, gotten sick-

DH: [sips drink]

SZ: -during the COVID-19 outbreak, and what has been your experience in responding to the sickness?

DH: I have not gotten sick with COVID. Yay. We did have one family in the church that, three of the four of them, had COVID all at the same time [coughs]. And I had done a funeral for that family. They had the funeral for that family on a Saturday, and the mom did not come to the

funeral because she was at the clinic and tested for COVID, and then found out a couple days later that she had COVID, and then the others in the family had COVID and then I'm like, "Well I spent a whole lot of time with them." So I went and had a COVID test and showed up negative, but still needed to isolate for a while. I-you know there's one person that I-that I knew many years ago I know died from COVID. But as far as-as I've heard, that's the only person that I've known that's died from COVID. Have had some other friends that have-that have had COVID but all have-have survived. Most of the ones that I know had fairly mild symptoms of COVID. One-one had a rough go-or a couple of them had a rough go but made-made it through. So, yeah, knock on wood. Really, considering the number of people that I know, it's been very, very, very small percentage of people that have gotten sick. As far as I know, no one in my family has had it. No one else in the church has had it.

SZ: In what ways do you think that COVID-19 is affecting people's mental and or physical health? Whether it be the people who get it, or the people who are, you know, just everyone right now in this whole pandemic? How has this affected-

DH: Mmm.

SZ: -the mental and physical health?

DH: Well, it's-it's aff-I feel very confident in broad brushing this [chuckles]. It has jacked up everyone's anxiety and everyone's stress level. I-I think we're all anxious and stressed about this in one way or another. Even a-even amongst those who deny the existence, there's probably been a lot of stress and anxiety in them going "Oh my god, wh-why do these people keep pretending this virus is something real." I mean, I'm sure that's got to be stressing them out as well. But for the rest of us, just, you know, being stuck at home, having to-to do life so differently, especially those that have children that are-are trying to do, you know, couple days in school, couple days homeschool and virtual, and not virtual and-and yeah, it's just been a lot of ambiguity, anxiety amongst people there. Those that have depression, I think this has been, you know, really an accelerant or-or something to-to increase the amount of depression that people feel, and those who are just generally suffer from anxiety that's been ramped up. I have some friends with depression and anxiety and it's definitely affected them. And-and most of those that I know are also pretty politically aware. So there's-there's just this increased anxiety from COVID, but then add on top of that another layer of anxiety and stress seeing our national leadership fail so poorly at-at controlling or managing it, or even showing any interest in-in controlling or managing it. Yeah, for some of my friends, that's been a real-that's probably been worse than the pandemic itself is just seeing how-how poorly it's-it's been managed. Physically, probably most of us have- have put on some weight. Much more sedentary I-you know, I think of-the job of a pastor is pretty much a sit down job to begin with [chuckles]. But now that, like, all my meetings are at home, I'm not even getting, like, the exercise from the parking lot to wherever I'm having a meeting. You know, the exercise between meetings is to walk into the kitchen to get another cup of coffee and come back to the table, so that's why I've been really trying to force myself to get out and-and do walking every day and-and-and not being able to-to get to the gym or do some things that-that would exercise a lot of other muscles besides the legs. And I think people are also tired. You know, it's just gone on for so long and that the-the mental issues can soon start taking on physical issues with not sleeping well and being tired from that, or just being tired from constant stress. I mean that in of itself is hard on the body to just be ramped up all the time and to be-to be worried. And-and I think there's-ther's also some physical effect in-in not being

around people. I'm not entirely sure what that is, but I-I'm seeing, at least when I talk to friends, they're-those that really like to be around people, like to hug are kinda touchy feely, really feeling the absence of that physical contact with other people as-as well and-and-and that-that causes a lot of issues. And-and-and the pandemic came at the same time as an election. And elections, presidential elections, are always a time of some anxiety and stress also, and-yeah, it just seemed like this year, all sorts of stuff came [chuckles] together at the same time, and I-I think we're all-temperatures are getting shorter. I've noticed with myself, my-my-my ability to be irritated, has gotten much better. Much more easy-much, much easier to irritate me now or to find myself getting irritated at-at little piddly stuff that any other time would not have-have bothered me at all. But-but it's just-it's just getting to feel like, you know, every little minor irritation is just one more thing on the pile that's already piled kind of high. And that's been tough and-and sitting in meetings on video, staring at the screen, not being able to look at people around a table, or to look out the window for a moment. You know, if we're on a meeting like this and I turn and I look out the window, if we were in person you-you wouldn't even think about it. But there's something about being on this Zoom thing that when someone looks away, you're like, "Oh, now they're not interested." So you do kind of need to keep focusing, and that's hard on the eyes. And that takes a lot of energy to-keep focused on a meeting like that as well, and you can only do so many hours of staring at a computer screen every day. That gets to be exhausting and tiring. As wonderful as it is, sometimes, to not have to go somewhere for a meeting, and to save on the gas and the travel time and it-it also-it gets to be a lot, so-

SZ: You mentioned-we've talked before about the government officials'-

DH: [sips drink]

SZ: -response to the outbreak. How do you feel the municipal leaders and officials in your community have responded?

DH: Hmm. Here in Eau Claire, in the city and the county, I think our leaders have done really, really well, and-and thank God for it. And I would say all around Wisconsin, I-I think every county's departments of health have done really good-done a really good job. And here in-in Eau Claire city, our city council is mostly all people who understand the reality, our county board mostly all people that understand the reality. So they've done a really good job here. I think our governor has done a really good job as well, I'd-unfortunately the-the opposing party of our governor, which has not met as a legislature in now, I think, seven months or eight months, has done jack other than sue the governor every time he tries to do something that might actually help the [chuckles] state get over this virus, including holding on to some of the-the emergency funding that-that should have gone out to businesses and-and people. But I would say, in-in this immediate-in this immediate area of Eau Claire city and Eau Claire County, I think our leadership has-has done a really good job, at least as good as-as they can do. And there's been opposition here but-but not as much. I-you know, even our-our chamber of commerce here in town and bunch other businesses have been on top of really wanting to do good things. And-and John Menard, say what you will I'd-even back in what, March or whatever, as soon as it started immediately: You have to wear a mask to go into a Menards store. I-you know, and for those watching this that don't know, this is the world headquarters of Menards, here in Eau Claire. So it was-it was good. I-I think it's really good to see them being on top of it and taking it seriously. I think that added a-added a lot of-a lot of weight to the movement, or gravitas.

SZ: So in terms of comparing local, state and federal leaders response to the crisis, how-and we've talked about it so far, but if you had to compare them all together, how would you-ah, how do they stack up to one another in your eyes, to put it another way?

DH: Hmm. I would say, speaking just of this-of this area and going up the chain, locally really good. Statewise, tried to do really good, too often got hamstrung by the deniers. At the national level, intentional failure. I mean, maybe not that they were thinking "Oh, how can we do a poor job?" It was just all-all this thinking of "Well, this isn't a real thing, we don't have to do anything." So just complete failure at that level, and-and to go broaden it out across the nation, you know, it-it really seems like-like, federal-the federal response was so poor. And by that I'm really talking president, Senate. You know, Dr. [Anthony] Fauci is federal level, CDC is federal, they've done great. But-but the political leadership did so poorly and really just left every state-kind of every state to itself. And some states have done really, really well. Some states have not. And that-that's a-another real failure of-of national leadership to allow the states to-to just flounder around and be forced to kind of figure things out on their own. And-and to get, you know-then that just filters down locally, some local areas, have done very poorly. And some of have-have done well, and-and a lot of that is just lack of leadership at the top.

SZ: Knowing what you know now, what do you think that individuals, communities or governments need to keep in mind for the future?

DH: Hmm. Well, it'd be nice if they would keep in mind just how quickly this can-can become an outbreak again. And so I'd-I'd-I would hate to see us, you know, once it starts to go down like has happened al-already, a couple times starts to go down, and then immediately just want to open everything up instead of being patient and say, well, let-we've got to wait for it to go way down and then start opening up and do it more slowly and more intentionally, or we're just gonna keep seeing this: go down a little bit, open up, explode. Go down, open up, explode. Again, I, you know, just really-I hope for patience. You know, and-and with the vaccine coming up, hopefully coming sometime soon, I also-I-I don't-I-there is such a-a lack of understanding of-of science in this country, that I also fear once the vaccine is out, that a lot of people are gonna think "Oh, we have a vaccine, therefore everything's okay." Instead of realizing like, okay, no, it's gonna take six, nine months to get enough people vaccinated that we're in the clear. You know, again, be patient. You know, I-I-yeah. I'll just leave it at that, or I'll-I'll go off on a tirade. More science education in this country is what we need.

SZ: [chuckles]

DH: [chuckles] Sorry, it's-it's just [sighs] that's been such a stick in my craw this last couple of months. [sips drink]

SZ: Has your experience through all of this transformed how you think about your family, your friends and your community? And if so, in what ways?

DH: Hmm. [chuckles] Well, in a couple of ways. One: I do have some pretty conservative friends, and some in my family. So it was no surprise to see their reactions. But there was some surprise in that those that I thought are maybe a little more normal, more mainline, been kind of surprised at-at the number of them that, at least seeing on Facebook, that have bought into some of the conspiracy hoax stuff. That-that was a bit of a-a shock. I really thought they were a little

wiser and more in-intelligent than that. So there's that, that's kind of a negative. On the positive side is, now that I've not been able to just hang out with people, have people over for dinner, go to people's homes, go out to eat with people, whatever, I-just a real, well what I hope will become a real appreciation of them when we're able to do that again. And-and the hope that I-I don't take-that I don't take those moments for granted when we're able to-to be together. Yeah, I-and just even-you know, like I said, I'm a pretty introverted person. I don't really need to be around people a lot, but I do-I do miss it. And especially my friends, and I-I want to have that time back again.

SZ: Is there anything else we didn't talk about today that you would like to talk about?

DH: In relation to COVID-19? Hmm.

SZ: Anything you'd like really.

DH: Yeah, oh I-you know, maybe just some of the-the theological stuff, oh, we hit some of that. With, like say our church, or my church, Plymouth [United Church of Christ], and really kind of the United Church of Christ in general, and most of the other mainline churches being very much on the side of, let's say, on the side of [Dr. Anthony] Fauci: stay at home, wear a mask, be safe, you know, trust the scientist, whatever. But also, you know, because-an-and it's-it's a scientific thing, but it's also a big theological issue. How do we respond is, I-I think, a theological issue in terms of wanting to keep our neighbors safe, and others. So it's also been real distressing to see the number of churches, and we have a number of them here in Eau Claire but also around the country, that have been basically, we could say, side [President Donald] Trump that have been worshipping in person and not following the kind of safety protocols that they should, and that have been pushing some of the hopes stuff and, you know, trying to-to bringing out lawsuits saying like "Oh, telling a church that they can't worship together is a violation of our rights." Whereas, I think, my tradition and so many of the mainline traditions are like, well, you know, "We-we will not be gathering and worship, because it's dangerous. We don't want to make people sick." And some of these other expressions of Christianity are very much like "We don't care if it makes people sick, we're going to worship in person," and-and then either invent a theological excuse "God will protect us because we're faithful so we can gather, we don't have to worry about it because we're God's chosen" or some B.S. [bull shit] like that. Or that they're just doing it because they worship the Constitution maybe more than-than God or following the Bible. It's like "Well, we have a legal right to gather, so by God we're gonna gather." I-and it's-there's been some struggle there, because-and-and we've had churches in town-I, you know, I remember, oh, Peace Church here in town. I hope no one from this church watches this video later on. But I want to say it was three or four weeks ago, the-after-after the rates in Eau Claire, the COVID rates in Eau Claire, in this area, had really skyrocketed, they were still doing three worship services on Sundays. And I saw them post on their Facebook page, this is on a Friday or Saturday, something like because, they said "Because of the amount of sickness that we have in this congregation among our membership and some of the leadership, we're only going to do two services on Sunday." Right, and then like by Saturday night, yeah, I think it was Saturday night, they posted again. It's like "Okay, now we're just having one service tomorrow." I-and I was appalled. O-becau [chuckles]-because you have so many sick people, you're going down to three services [chuckles], or two, or whatever it was, like, close the damn church. How many of those people who are sick now got sick when they came to church the week before? I-I don't-I don't understand. What is-is going on with that? I-you know, you'd think that a-that a church of all

places would be about wanting to protect the life of its parishioners and its community, but-but there's-there's a really toxic form of Christianity in this country that-that unfortunately is represented at the highest levels of our political leadership. So, there we are. There-there-I-I-I think there's a real theological question here in terms of the pandemic. And at least our response as clergy. Because there has been a good group of us clergy in town that have been very vocal about wanting to keep people safe, and how we respond. Yeah. Hope that made sense.

SZ: Thank you. Thank you very much for talking today. After this, I'll be sure to let you know how you can access this interview, and I'll be sure to send you the transcript as soon as I'm done.

DH: All right. Well, good luck making complete sentences out of any of that.

SZ: [laughs] Thank you.

DH: I try- [laughs] I tried to be coherent. I hope it worked. I hope that was helpful.

SZ: It was, thanks.

DH: Yeah. How many others are you interviewing for this?

SZ: I am interview-a total of two-

DH: Oh, ok.

SZ: -Total of two. And-so thank you again and-yeah I'll be sure to let you know.