

Churches: Our Everyday Superheroes

Stories of Hope and Inspiration from Our Churches Across the Country

First Presbyterian Church of Downey, CA

All because of Karen.

Every member of the small congregation in Downey, California feels blessed to have the leadership of Dr. Karen Claassen. She came to the small congregation three years ago as a Designated Pastor to help them heal, and she has not left. Her progressive thinking coupled with her ability to be the hands and feet of Jesus in their midst, enabled Dr. Claassen to fulfill her job with care, compassion, vision, and clarity as she helped her congregation and community with true leadership skills during this pandemic.

First Presbyterian Church of Downey is not the only small congregation with limited financial resources whose many members have faced significant financial challenges during this time. Dr. Claassen, when the opportunities arose for the church to apply for grants and other funds to support the ministry and staff, was quick to action, thus ensuring the church had the necessary resources to continue paying staff as well as meeting their other financial obligations. Dr. Claassen even took a personal cut in salary which started on week one, but she also donned her mask and led the first of many worships from the church steps.

With a servant heart, but limited technological resources and know how, Dr. Claassen was able to quickly put together weekly worship videos. She continues to be on the steps each Sunday morning during the traditional worship service time so that she can meet with anyone who needs prayer, and she coordinated additional drive-up/outdoor services. She sends handwritten personalized notes each month to every household within the congregation. She encouraged leadership to increase their personal communication with the membership, especially the most vulnerable. Under her leadership, the church held its first ever virtual VBS for children of all ages with stories, a magic show, an artist creating a Bible story animation, and so much more. Each day, Dr. Claassen welcomes everyone to “The

Neighborhood” sharing stories and ways to be good neighbors.

Dr. Claassen has taken the challenge of the pandemic as an opportunity to rethink how the small congregation can do ministry within the community. During a recent sermon, she stated, “We have the opportunity to sigh deeply and keep our hearts soft so that what comes out of us is good and the Holy Spirit’s fruit.”

Submitted by Donna Huff