

Elisa Erickson

Elisa is a 60-ish white female who lives in the Washington Park neighborhood of southeast Denver. Elisa currently co-chairs FUSD's Caring Committee and is a seminary student at Iliff. She and her husband Richard are 20-year members of FUSD, and both have been heavily involved across the spectrum of committees and activities. Their daughter Ava attends college at Fordham University.

In early 2020, Elisa was in her third year of a four-year residential Masters of Divinity program at Iliff School of Theology and had pulled back from involvement in a lot of church activities due to time constraints. Her major area of involvement was the FUSD Caring Committee, which met in person only once a year and otherwise communicated through phone and e-mail. She and Richard regularly attended Sunday services and felt things at the church were going well. A draft of a new covenant was circulating for review, which Elisa found exciting. "It was a big step. The church was awash in good energy, and we felt good about supporting the work with our money. We felt good about the place our church held in the community and what we were attempting to do together."

Since Elisa joined in 2000, the services had begun to take on a more spiritual bent that she appreciates and feels is good for us as a congregation. "Social action has to be supported by a spiritual foundation if it is not to be derailed by either ego or burnout. That spiritual base is what a church can offer that another kind of organization may not. Staff at FUSD has done a good job of blending those elements and it shows in the energy within the church."

At Iliff, Elisa's program offered classes in-person, online and in a hybrid format. During the 2019-2020 academic year, Elisa was doing an internship at a small hospice, which included an internship seminar through Iliff. "Right after the close of Winter Quarter 2020, everything shut down and classes went completely online through Spring 2021. That is not my favorite learning style. My internship class was fine because we had been meeting since September and had built strong relationships. We just moved into synchronized Zoom classes." Other classes were conducted through asynchronous Zoom recorded lectures, with assigned readings and prompts. Each student would post comments and respond to one or two comments from other students. "I don't find that format very compelling because it is hard to sustain a dialogue. Although Iliff has had an online platform for some time, some professors are better skilled than others at using it. The school adjusted as the year progressed. Ultimately, most professors held synchronized Zoom classes at least three times each quarter, which helped."

Elisa completed her hospice chaplaincy primarily via tele-health. "That was hard. Hospice nurses would facilitate FaceTime meetings, but many patients had dementia, so faces on a screen were not relatable. Sometimes, phone calls were better than FaceTime because the technology was more familiar."

Although facilities did not allow chaplains in for the rest of the spring, some chaplain visits to home-based patients resumed in April and May. The shortage of personal protective equipment was a challenge requiring the reuse and doubling of masks. Families and patients were deeply grateful for visits and support.

“My internship ended in May, though I continued contact with some of my patients. Once a week, I still call one lady who is 96 and has dementia. I’ve never met her, but she knows who I am when I call. It is amazing how much of a connection we built just over the phone. Normally, I would not have kept that up on a weekly basis because she lives far away. Zoom, FaceTime and phone will not replace in-person chaplaincy, but they do allow more frequent contact with people under challenging circumstances; and for that reason, they may endure.”

Elisa and Richard’s daughter, Ava, was in the spring semester of her freshman year as 2020 opened, planning to come home in March on spring break. Mid-month, Fordham put out the word that everyone should go home for an extended 2-week break. Within an hour, everyone was streaming out of the dorms and Ava arrived home the next day to a Denver that was shutting down. By that Friday, it was clear that students would not return to campus and college classes went online for the rest of the semester. Ava’s boyfriend and most of her school friends lived on the East Coast and the pandemic was intense there at the time. All her belongings stayed in her dorm room until May, when the college started scheduling time for students to come clean out their rooms. She travelled back by herself to move out with the help of her boyfriend.

Elisa reflects that it was nice to have Ava home, and to see how she and her boyfriend figured out how to navigate their long-distance relationship. “They were intentional about communicating and visiting, and proud of how they got through a difficult time.”

In fall 2020, Ava returned to school and rented an apartment with a couple of girls. They maintained a COVID pod of 10 people who hung out together and made it work. Ava was grateful not to be a freshman then, since it was much harder for new students to make friends amid the restrictions.

Elisa observed how powerfully different developmental stages affected each family member’s analysis of risk. “Richard and I stayed home and stayed put, concerned about the higher risk to people in our age cohort. Ava and her friends were cautious, but they felt an imperative to be with each other.”

Shortly after the shutdown, the Caring Committee, at Mike’s request, organized an outreach program to call or email all the members of FUSD. “I think this helped both the callers and the called because it reminded us that we were not in this alone.” Due to the need to social distance, the Caring Committee was unable to offer in-person support such as rides and did not have a lot of requests for meals perhaps because people were delaying elective surgeries or had adapted to grocery delivery. The Committee’s primary role was sending cards and staying in touch with folks who were more isolated.

In late 2020, Elisa started another chaplaincy internship at a nursing home. “When I started the nursing home chaplaincy internship, they were already past the surge in their COVID deaths, but were still dealing with the isolation and grief. The one-story building made window visits with relatives possible, but it was still extremely difficult for the residents and staff.”

“The joy of both internships was that they put me in authentic contact with people who are quite different from me, more than I have been for many years.”

The uncertainty of the pandemic was disorienting. How long would the shutdown and outbreaks last? What risk was associated with which choices? What level of risk could all agree was bearable? Medical advice kept changing as the science evolved. The CDC got caught in the whiplash of politics and administrative transition and didn't handle messaging as well as it might have.

The Erickson family was lucky in the pandemic, Elisa judges. "We had a comfortable home, money, food, and we didn't lose our jobs." Being able to get outdoors, walking and hiking in Colorado helped Elisa cope personally with the pandemic. The family was privileged to find a condo in Frisco to rent for a year from a couple who left to go sailing. "It was a great way to get out of town periodically, a way to travel without traveling. It was a lot of fun, a blessing." She missed the recreation center when it closed but embraced yoga classes on Zoom. "I think that worked because I knew and liked the teacher having had her in person before." Elisa also tried to keep up her meditation practice and was intentional about self-care.

Elisa made a conscious effort to prioritize connection with friends during the pandemic. A pod of neighbors started meeting once a week in someone's back yard. These weren't people in the closest kinship and friendship circles, but proximity counted in an unexpected way during a pandemic. "We continued through the winter to meet around a fire pit that didn't really keep you warm but gave the illusion of heat. It was a blessing to come to know these lovely neighbors in a deeper way. Our neighborhood pod precluded meeting with some other groups as I didn't want to expand in-person visiting too wide. So, I made a point of calling friends and attending book club meetings and Core Circle on Zoom. We got better at the technology over time."

While COVID-19 had the most direct impact on Elisa and her household of any of the historic events of 2020, she also followed intently the Black Lives Matter protests, the Derek Chauvin trial, and the January 6, 2021 insurrection following the November election. "It all feels tied together. You really can't pull them apart."

"When Richard and I looked at the civil protests, from the perspective of being in the higher-risk age group, we decided not to participate. Our task, now, is to find out what portion of the work is ours to do and to embrace it. You have to love people one person at a time. The process is slow and painstaking. How I interact with one person on any given day can have effects that ripple out to the broader world."

Elisa is fascinated (not in a good way) by the need of so many people to hold onto conspiracy theories and to completely disregard science. "I get why people distrust the government, but to then spite themselves because they hate the government so much that they refuse to do simple things that could keep them safe. Distrust of government, education, and educated people has long, deep roots that are not easy to fix. It is hard to see where that leads us. How can we address issues as massive and complicated as a pandemic or climate change if we are determined to believe that Dr. Fauci is intentionally lying to us? I think fear drives all of this. The world has changed so fast at so many levels that it is really frightening. People try to deal with fear in many ways, but mostly we try to find something we can control. Some days I feel like the world has to fall apart so we can build something new together. Other days, in the depths of despair, I think we're finished as a species. I don't know which notion, if either, is the right one."

Elisa plans to finish seminary in December 2021 and is still discerning what she will do beyond then. “I want to be of use, but I’m not looking for a 9-5 job. The direction of my path was on my mind before the pandemic, but the shut-down helped me focus on staying open to possibilities and trusting that things will become clear in their own time.”

As FUSD returns to in-person church, Elisa wants us to be inclusive of everyone, but recognizes that will be a complicated task. “I think people will be hesitant to participate in crowds for quite a while.” She suspects (and hopes) that some of the ethics and etiquette we adopted in response to COVID might continue to be more generally practiced as the virus loses its grip: Wash hands frequently and well. When sick, stay home; don’t go out and infect others.