Kristin Jackson
Narrator

Brooke A. Sapper
Loyola University Chicago
Interviewer

Kristin Jackson: KJ
Brooke A. Sapper: BAS

Interviewed 29 March 2023

Abstract: This interview is a conversation between Kristin Jackson, the main pastor of Living Water Community Church's English-speaking congregation, and Brooke A. Sapper, a graduate student in the History Department at Loyola University Chicago. In this interview, they discuss Pastor Jackson's history with the Living Water Community Church as well as how the church runs today. There is an additional focus on the multicultural nature of the congregation as well as the influences of music and other community events. Finally, they discuss how COVID changed worship and community engagement. The recording took place in the prayer room at Living Water Community Church (6808 N. Ashland Blvd) and is approximately 53 minutes long. The interview took place as part of the *Gathering Places* project at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. For more information, see https://uwm.edu/gatheringplaces.

Kristin Jackson (KJ): Think you're pretty good?

Brooke A. Sapper: I think we are good. Yes.

KJ: Alright. Very good.

BAS: Okay. Today is March 29th, 2023. This is an interview with Pastor Kristin Jackson of Living Water Community Church. My name is Brooke Sapper. I am a grad student at Loyola University Chicago, and I will be conducting this interview for the Gathering Places project. Can you please introduce yourself?

KJ: Hi. Yeah, sure. I'm Kristin Jackson, and I'm the pastor here at Living Water Community Church. I've been a part of the church since it began in 1995 and a pastor here for about the last 11-ish years.

BAS: Thank you. Let's see. In this interview, you can choose what questions to answer and the recorder can be turned off at any time. After this interview is completed, I will transcribe it and send you a copy. If, upon reviewing it, you would like to redact any information, it will be deleted. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

KS: Sure. No problem.

BAS: Okay, let's begin. So, Living Water Community Church is located in the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago. Are you from this area?

KJ: I was born and raised in Grand Rapids, Michigan, but I've lived here in Rogers Park since 1994. So a long time.

BAS: Okay. And you said you've been a member of the church since the beginning. Can you tell me a little bit why you joined?

KJ: Yeah, I started out at this church because my husband grew up participating in and being a member of our sister church, which is in South Evanston. And so then when we met and decided to get married, which was in 1994, we moved to this area. And at that time there was a group of folks from our sister church, Reba Place, that were in serious discussions about starting a church here in this neighborhood, and we decided to join with them. It seemed kind of interesting and exciting to be a part of a church plant in a new place, so.

BAS: Do you know why they were looking to start a new church down here?

KJ: Yeah. The church that our sister church has a really important value of being a part of a church that is in the neighborhood where you live, because we feel like it helps us to have better community both within the church and then also it helps us to love our neighbors better because it's the same neighbors literally as each other. So we're sending our kids to the same schools and shopping at the same grocery stores and walking on the same sidewalks. So we care. And so at our sister church, most of the congregation lives in South Evanston and can walk to that church. And there were a group of folks that were living here in Rogers Park, and shared the same value but wanted to be in Chicago and wanted a church here.

BAS: So would you say that Living Water is like the exact same church just moved somewhere different? Or are there certain differences that you think set your community apart from Reba place?

KJ: No, not at all. We are from the same denomination, which is Mennonites, Mennonite Church USA. So we share some theological values and some, maybe you could say, congregational DNA because of having this shared history together. But at this point, it's been 30 years and both congregations have grown and changed in various ways over that time. And our church has changed in a lot of ways because of the people that are here and the people that worship here.

BAS: Okay, so getting this church started in the early days, what was it like just starting out?

KJ: Well, for me, it was really fun. I had just graduated from college, so I was pretty young. And in that early phase everything was on the table to decide. So ordinarily, with an established church, if you decide you want to start going to that church, there's things that are already established, like when you worship and where you worship, and the patterns and routines of how what people do and what people value and believe and how they their traditions. Which is great, but, early on, none of that was established. Everything had to be decided. And so it was really fun to be a part of a group of people that was discussing everything and making decisions about everything without assuming any of the things that you would normally assume with an established congregation. So I really enjoyed that, especially as a young adult.

BAS: And you're not exactly in a traditional worship space either. You're in a commercial building. I believe it was an old mini-mall and you share half the building with a laundromat. So are there any challenges or any benefits that come with using this space?

KJ: Yeah. So in the early days, we actually for the first ten years of our life as a church, we were renting space from a church just up the street, the United Church of Rogers Park from 1995 until about 2004, I think. And after we had been the church for a few years and we realized we were going to like survive as a church , it was going to continue, we started looking around the neighborhood for some real estate to purchase so that we could have a more— So that we could do church seven days a week, so that we could have ministries, so that we could gather at other times with a little bit more flexibility because it was our own space. And so at some point, this space became available. And at that point, we'd already looked at a lot of other spaces around the neighborhood, most of which were nontraditional church spaces.

My friends who are colleagues and pastors of churches that have more traditional buildings, I would say, generally speaking, there are some downsides to traditional buildings, which I'm really grateful for. A lot of the old, beautiful church buildings that have been around for 100 years also have 100-year-old plumbing and heating and electrical wiring and spaces that were designed for the ways that congregations did church in the past. And those buildings come with an awful lot of headaches and hassles that we just simply don't have to deal with because we have a much simpler building. That's from when we bought it. It's ADA-compliant. It's got modern wiring and plumbing; it's got a modern roof and there's nothing precious about it. So, when we first bought the building, we put up the walls that we wanted to put up so that the space could be how we wanted it to be, back in 2004. If we were in a historic building, it would be beautiful, but we would have a lot of limitations and a lot of expense.

So yeah, I have a friend who lives — who's the pastor of the church that we used to rent out of, which is just up the street. And it's a probably 100, at least a hundred-year-old building. And it's gorgeous. But they've got this, you know, hundreds of thousands of dollar project to put in an elevator and their front steps which are beautiful, are falling apart. And so they've got to fundraise to redo all that and we just don't have that problem. So, I think overall it's a net positive. It's less obvious that we're a church because it's a nontraditional building and we're about to replace our sign out front. So, it'll be a little bit more obvious with a bigger, brighter, new sign. But it still is going to be, fundamentally, a commercial property. So, I guess that makes it a little less obvious. But, you know, for all the advantages of being in obviously a church building, which does signal to people who you are and what you're doing, there's also people that have a lot of barriers about coming into a traditional church space because of their own stories. And so a nontraditional space—

BAS: Take some of the pressure off?

KJ: Takes— Yeah, I think so. I think so.

BAS: And you renovated this as a community. On the church, you got to choose where rooms went. And how did you how did you do that? How did you set up the plan for making the space your own?

KJ: A lot of meetings. [laughs] So yeah, we met to talk about it, to talk about how we could use the space the best that we could for the people that we had. And it's a relatively small space. And our church has grown since 2003 when we bought the building. And so now we're kind of bursting at the seams now. But yeah, we met to talk about how we wanted to use the space, what was important to us, wanting to have a worship space that suited and fit us well and wanting to have some

classrooms and offices, a prayer room. There were various things that we decided that we wanted and needed, and then a fair bit of the work we did ourselves. We hired professionals to come in to do the things that we could not do. And we hired architects to make sure that we were building a building that would not fall down and was up to code and all that. [laughs] But a lot of the demolition work was done by people in the church and then things like dry-walling and painting and other projects were done by volunteers in the church, including kids that did the parts that the kids could do, and adults. And there there's some adults in the church that have remodeling experience, professional and nonprofessional, that were able to do a little more than supervise some of the rest of us so, yeah.

BAS: Yeah, it sounds nice. Do you know what this building was before it was put up for sale? I haven't been able to find anything on that yet.

KJ: When we first purchased the building, we purchased it with the Bubble Express, which is the laundromat that still is there. Then there is a part of the church, a part of the building that at this point, for about the last several years, three or four years, has been a part of the church's space. But when we purchased the building, there was a tenant in there that was called Jerry's Mini Mart. And it was a — they sold candy.

BAS: Like a bodega?

KJ: Yeah, basically it was a bodega. That's exactly right. And then most of the space that is what the church currently used was a space of some— it was a little questionable what was going on in there. They sold luggage, they sold used shoes. And it probably sold other things that maybe were not legal or up to code as well, we think, when we bought the building.

BAS: And my next question was actually how you felt your congregation suits this building. Now, after 20 years, you said you're bursting at the seams. Now, do you have any plans to deal with that?

KJ: So a couple of years ago we were like I said, we were able to take over the mini-mart space which was really useful. We wanted to have that space for two reasons. One is that we have an after-school program that is its own separate 501(c)(3), but it's very much connected with and supported by the church. And also, even though it's its own organization with its own board of directors and its own directors, it also is a ministry of the church as well. And they needed more space. So it was good to have an additional large room. Are you picking everything up you need to pick up?

BAS: [thumbs up]

KJ: Good. Okay. And then also our church over the last ten or 15 years has grown into being a very multilingual congregation. And so on Sunday mornings, we worship in about four different languages. And then, during the first hour of our service, we're all worshiping together. And then in the second hour of the service, the children go to Sunday school classes that are based on the age that they are. Excuse me. And then the adults go to— They like to divide up so that they can hear the sermon and also pray together and maybe do a little bit more worship —depends a little bit on the group— in the language of their preference. And so because we have all these different groups that are meeting in that second hour, we really needed more space, which now we even need more space than we currently have. But at least we have that space. And now we're trying to figure out how we can accommodate a few more groups at that time.

BAS: Can you tell me more about these different groups within your congregation?

KJ: Yeah. Yeah. So currently there's a group of Cambodian adults. The Cambodians have been worshiping with us since the church began. They were a part of our church when we were with our sister church in Evanston, Reba Place Church, because in the eighties, Reba Place Church had a outreach ministry to Cambodian refugees that had just at that time in 1983, 84, 85, they were just arriving in the United States after the Khmer Rouge genocides of the late seventies and the early eighties. And so out of that, there grew this Cambodian sub-congregation that then a lot of those Cambodians were living in Chicago, not Evanston, so it made a little more sense for them to be worshiping with us here in Chicago. And then also it happened at a number of people that were going to become members of Living Water were also involved with the Cambodians, even though they were English speakers. They were a part of that as a ministry. And so and because they had all these relationships that that started. So that's the Cambodians. They continue to worship with us. They are the smallest group of adults now.

And then there's a group of Nepali-speaking adults, which is some of them are ethnically Nepali and some of them are ethnically Bhutanese. There was— the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees resettled a whole bunch of Nepali-speaking Bhutanese people all over the world. But in the United States and in Chicago, starting in about 2000, I don't know, 2007, 2008, somewhere in there. And so, people like to worship with other people that are similar to them, speak the same language as them, people that have shared demographics. So we kind of became the Nepali-speaking church in Chicago, and that group grew over the last ten or 15 years.

And then the fourth group is a group of East Africans that also came mostly to the United States out of refugee resettlement programs that were also happening starting in around 2008-2009 and continuing to this day. There are families— there was a family that just— two families actually that just showed up at church for the first time last Sunday that are Congolese families. So those East African families are coming from several countries that are in East Africa. Mostly Burundi, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo. A couple of them are coming from Uganda. A bunch of them identify as Burundian or Rwandan but spent many years in camps in Tanzania. So those families, at least initially, they came to the United States with refugee visas. Some of them were settled in a third country, or a second country like Tanzania or Kenya. And then they came to the United States to become permanent residents and U.S. citizens. So there's a whole group of folks from our church that came here like that or came here because their family was initially resettled here, and now they're on family reunification visas. And similar to the Nepali folks, people like to worship in a church with people that are similar to them. And once they learn that, you know, Living Water is one of the churches in Chicago where there's a lot of East African refugees, they also started coming because they wanted to find friends and people to be doing church with. So that's continued.

So, we feel as a value of our church, like we're not a social service agency, we're a church. And as a church, our commitment is to do church together because we believe that the body of Christ includes people of all nations. And so it's important to figure out how to be church, to do church together, to analyze who has the power in the congregation, and to really interrogate that and to try to find ways of sharing our resources, making decisions, sharing our space, sharing our van, whatever together so that we can be one congregation together.

BAS: Yeah. So you would offer the services for language specifics and you do you stay together for like if the church hosts an event like a potluck? Is that ever separate or is it mainly just together as one large congregation?

KJ: It's both/and. So every Sunday we have an hour of worship together. Every Sunday our kids are together because our Sunday school is based on the age of the kids, not the language of their parents. And in fact, most of the kids are going to Chicago Public Schools, and so they're all speaking English all day, every day in their classrooms. So the kids, even if another language is spoken in their home, are pretty quick with English pretty fast. We have monthly communion and potluck worship services together, so like it's the first Sunday of every month. So this coming Sunday and every first Sunday, all of the adults worship together for the whole service. And part of that service is a potluck. And we try to think a little bit more carefully that Sunday to make sure that we sing songs in a bunch of different languages and other things are happening in different languages so that all of the adults have at least some of the service or things that they understand.

When it comes to festivals and holidays, there are church traditions that are all-church traditions. And then there are church traditions that are hosted by one of the language groups that everyone is invited to, but it's hosted by different people. So, for example, on Christmas Day, we have a big Christmas Day worship service and meal that's hosted by our East African members. Christmas Eve we have a big we have a Christmas Eve service that's hosted by the English speakers, but everybody is invited and welcome and usually New Year's Day we kind of switch around. But this year the Nepali congregation hosted our New Year's Day service and celebration, which involves a lot of food. For Easter, we'll all be together. And so the whole service will be in all the languages. And we'll be singing songs in all the different languages probably. Well, I was going to say the hosting was by the English speakers, but that's not exactly true, because we'll have a breakfast. Like not breakfast, really. We'll have chai, which the Nepali congregation and a bunch of different families, every family brings a gallon of chai so that we have a chai for everybody. And we'll have coffee cakes that probably some American families will bring the coffee cakes. And then Mandazi is an East African snack that's made of it's like fried dough, basically, deep fried. So a couple of the East Africans will bring the Mandazi in, we'll have all of those things. So it's a little bit of shared and a little bit separate kind of depending on what people have the energy for and the creative desire to lead out on.

We have small groups in the church for adults that tend to do, generally speaking, have tended to be more smaller language specific ones, but not exclusively. We've experimented a little bit with things that we can do across language groups. But, for people to share and pray more deeply, it seems like that happens better if people are able to do that in a language that they feel comfortable with. So there's a English language women's Bible study that meets one morning a week. There's a Friday prayer that's in Swahili that meets, yeah, Friday evenings. There's a Nepali prayer and Bible study that's on Mondays. There's, yeah, different things.

Our leadership is— that's one area where it feels really important that we have representative leadership of the congregation. So our pastors, we have an East African pastor, we have a Cambodian pastor, Nepali pastor, there's me, I'm the leader of the team, and then we have a youth pastor. He was born in the United States and speaks English. But we, the pastors, meet together every week to do a little bit of planning and, yeah, sorting out. Both very mundane. Who's doing

what when? Who wants to help with this thing? Do we want to plan this thing together, or do we want to do it separately? You know, those kind of just ordinary practical things. And then we also talk more about theological things and values that we share and ways that we are noticing that there's differences because we're coming from very different cultures and there is things that we disagree about theologically or culturally. And so, the pastors, we try to take some time to address those things, at least among the four of us, so that we can figure out to how to handle things. And then hopefully that allows us to help provide direction for the rest of the church. So that leadership area is very intentionally a diverse group.

And then our elders. Also, we have a couple of English-speaking elders, a couple of Nepali-speaking elders, a couple of East African elders. And we've just switched to this new model so we've only had one meeting that works this way because we have a larger group. But when the all of the elders and pastors meet together, which is quarterly, it's a three-hour meeting and we have questions that we plan ahead that we're going to talk about, and we will introduce the topic with all of us. Everybody who is an elder does speak English. But for many of the elders, it's their second language. So we talk about it as a large group. And then we divide into language groups and we discuss like I'm in the English cohort and we talk like, the topic the last time is "How is worship going on Sunday mornings? What's not working? What is working?" And so we talked about that in these language-based cohorts and then we took notes and then we gathered as a group and then whoever the note taker was reported back and we used a talking piece to kind of slow the discussion down because otherwise the English speakers tend to kind of dominate the discussion. And so we have to use strategies to kind of rein the English speakers in [laughs] a little bit. So that's our strategy. Our next elders meeting, it'll also be another three-hour meeting, our main topic will be our annual budget. So we've got like advance work prior to the meeting so that we will have a budget piece together. Then we'll have some discussion questions that we need to sort out as pastors and elders and make some decisions about using the same structure. So, yeah. And then on Sunday mornings we rotate. So one Sunday of the month we have an English language, music and worship leaders, one Sunday of the month it's Nepali, one Sunday of the month it's East African, and then the fourth Sunday it's a communion Sunday where we try to mix it up. Yeah.

BAS: All right, thank you. On the subject of leadership, it's my understanding that you weren't originally a pastor when you joined this church.

KJ: Yeah, that's true. When I first graduated from college, I was a teacher for a bunch of years. So I have an elementary teaching certificate, and I did my student teaching in a neighborhood Chicago public school. But then I ended up doing most of my teaching at a preschool that's in Evanston for a bunch of years. And then, about, let's see, 2000. My first child was born in 2001. And right about that same time, I also just really wanted to learn more about the Bible. And so, I started, I took a Bible, a New Testament class at North Park University, North Park Seminary. And then over the course of about the next ten years, I took one Bible class and then I took another one and took another one. And by the time I was maybe three or four classes in, I thought, you know, I kind of just want to get a whole degree. And so I went for my master's of divinity.

And all through that whole period, I was actively involved as a lay leader in the congregation. I volunteered for all the things. I was the youth group leader for a while. I taught Sunday school. I was a worship leader. I occasionally did some preaching. Like, I did, I served the term as an elder. I, you

know, I was in charge of planning and leading a couple of women's retreats and all church retreats, all the things as a volunteer. And then in 2008, the founding pastor of our church decided that she wanted to retire and move on to another role. So then in 2000 and— yeah, wait, 2000 and — Think I have that wrong — 2009. So, for a couple of years between 2009 and 2011, I was on an interim leadership team as the church decided what kind of leaders we were even looking for and had a pastoral search process. I applied for the job as pastor and then I was hired to be a pastor in 2011. And then it took a few more years for the team that we currently have to be solidified. So, my colleague, who is our youth pastor, was hired in 2012 and then the other pastors joined in years since then, so.

BAS: So what's your favorite part of being a pastor here?

KJ: Well, you know, I would say and maybe this is true for a lot of people, that your favorite thing in your least favorite things are often kind of like the same, right? So I love it about this job that because I am the lead pastor of a small church, it's not possible for people in that kind of a role to be super specialized. We kind of have to be a jack of all trades or a Jill of all trades. Just because churches of our size are too small to really, like, divide it out. And plus, because it's so necessary to have pastors who are of the language and culture of each of the different main groups in our church. That's the specialization. And so all of us kind of have to do a lot of all of the other things.

So, I'm doing a lot of preaching, I'm doing a lot of worship planning and leading, I'm doing a lot of oversight of volunteer teams that are doing all kinds of other things. I have to be able to understand our church budget and do budgeting, teaching, overseeing, training, and all the stuff. Some pastoral care. Visiting with people who are sick or hospitalized. Meeting with couples that are engaged and want to be married and helping with people when someone in the congregation has died or when there's a memorial service, all that, like all the stuff I do, all of it, which I love. I also find it's super challenging because it's my mind is always kind of scattered because I'm always thinking about a bunch of different things at once. And so I feel busy and challenged. I love meeting with people. I really love the relationships with the individuals in the church. Knowing them, I appreciate about— Like, I'm not a trained therapist and I don't do therapy, but I do meet with people to pray with them and to hear about what's going on in their lives and to try to be a good listener and try to ask good questions and to hold hope that God is with us in all of the circumstances of our lives, including the messy things. I love that. And unlike a therapist which has very strict professional boundaries, right? Like if you meet with a therapist, you really shouldn't have any other engagement with them in any other area of their life. As a pastor, when people come and meet with me, I know their kids, I know their spouses, I know their parents, I know their friends. I meet with them because we're, you know, working on something together. We worship together, we share meals together. And so I feel like I intuitively have the opportunity to also know and understand a person in a much fuller way that doesn't happen in other settings that are the other helping profession settings, which is both challenging, there's reasons why there is boundaries, but it also is really beautiful to know people in that kind of holistic way.

And often for in this case, you know, I've been around, I've known people in this congregation in many cases for 30 years. And so, we have a lot of history and a lot of ups and downs and challenges and things that we've been through together that were really hard and conflict that we've come around to the other side of. So that's really beautiful to be moving into being a community. I don't

know if I'm an elder. I'm 50. Does that make me an elder? I don't know. But, you know, there's there is a depth and richness to relationships. That happens because of all the all of the layers that just kind of build on each other. So, I love that.

BAS: So, Andi gave my group a tour and I saw those cool practice rooms that you have in that space now. I saw the mini golf hole.

KJ: [laughs]

BAS: [laughs] That was really cool. Which—

KJ: That was a active weekend.

BAS: Yes, it was really cool. So, would you agree that music is a large part of your congregation?

KJ: Yeah, and that's because we have some extremely gifted musicians that are a part of the congregation. And Andi and her husband, Al, are definitely right at the top of the list of dedicated volunteer musicians. And it's just so fantastic. It's also musically very important, I think, for churches throughout East Africa. I can't, I don't know, I can't speak for the continent. I probably shouldn't speak for even East Africa. But I've been there a number of times and I have in our own church, it seems to be true that music and choirs and gathering together as well as musicians to sing together is very significant in Christian formation and community culturally. And that's definitely true in this church. Like the way that you learn the stories of the Bible and the theology is by singing it together. The ways that you do Sunday school is by singing with your kids.

Youth Ministry. When I was in, I've been in Tanzania several times now and in Rwanda and my last, both trips, all the trips. But then also, like, I'm just thinking this last trip when I was in Tanzania, they had all these choirs that were gathering for the ordination of a woman pastor. And so it was basically like the youth group was the choirs. And they would all get in these vans and buses and drive from all over the country to meet up. And it was like the youth group trip because all these young adults, mostly, which were the choir, were traveling overnight in the bus and then they were getting there and then they were performing and they were singing together. And so, a lot of the things that maybe in a U.S. church context might happen in like youth group retreats, it's happening on choir trips for them, right? So in our church having a strong choir that's singing together and rehearsing together and then preparing so that they can sing in our worship services is really important too. So that's really also built on the music.

And then Al and Andy, who you've met, have this real vision as a music school. And that includes private lessons it includes meeting with the kids in the after-school program to teach them guitar and drumming, and I think they were doing— What do you call those little like xylophone things? They did that. But then also they have a Monday night jam session where anybody in the church that wants to come or community that wants to come and play on Monday nights can just come and they can bring an instrument or there's lots of instruments that are here and they play together. So, it just creates that culture.

So, but, so, but the other thing I really love answering that question, though, is I feel that as a church, part of my role as a pastor is to notice who the people are who are in the congregation and what their gifts and energy is and what the needs are that people have energy around. And what the,

like what, how people want to serve. Because then what the church is doing evolves a lot out of who the people are and what the people's felt desires and needs are, because I just really trust that the Holy Spirit is working in all of our lives and things are emerging out of all of us. And so right now in this season of our church life, music is huge and it's growing and I just really want to lean into that. But in other seasons of our church life, there have been other things that have emerged. And sometimes those things will kind of like, grow and peak and then they might fall, like diminish in how significant that they are in the life of the church. And then other things will emerge. And so it's my job as a leader to be tuned into that and noticing that and to try to be noticing it, hopefully, before everyone else in the church has noticed that, oh yeah, we're no longer really having the energy to do something.

Like we used to have Wednesday night potlucks, which were, for a season of the church, a huge life-giving thing. Like lots of people in the church loved to come to the potlucks and they would bring food. And then it turned out that there were lots of kids in the neighborhood that learned that there was free food here on Wednesday nights. And so they started coming. And so then we started having all these just kids that just came to our potlucks. They didn't come with their parents. They were just like, 30 kids, and they would come. And it was really great and super fun for a season of the church and we really loved all of the energy that was coming out of that. But then, you know, after a number of years of that sort of starting and then growing and getting bigger, bigger, bigger, bigger, bigger then and then we just started to realize, you know, we just don't really have the energy for this anymore. And this is something that kind of needs to draw to a close, and we need to bring that to an end and let it evolve into something else and then allow some. New things to emerge. So that's just part of the life cycle of a congregation, maybe any organization.

BAS: Yeah. In terms of changes, how did COVID impact Living Water?

KJ: Oh gosh. Well, like many churches all over the country and certainly here in Chicago, it was pretty challenging and devastating in a lot of ways. We were wanting to be pretty COVID-cautious, and we live in a very COVID-cautious city and neighborhood and we were wanting to participate in that. And so we did not meet in-person for between March of 2020 until over a year. Until we started the very beginnings of coming back to meeting in person a little bit in the summer of 2021. And really we didn't start Sunday school and really invite everybody back until the fall of 2021. So that was a really long time to be meeting on Zoom. We had some— so there were beautiful things that happened at that time, I think. I doing church on Zoom, and there were things that were surprisingly beautiful about worshiping together in that way. It was kind of lovely to just roll out of bed and people would get their coffees and meet in their pajamas on the living room couch and share as little family units. That was beautiful in some ways.

We had a few outdoor meetings. We had our Ash Wednesday service on the sidewalk outside the church, and we had, in 2021, we had a Easter sunrise service that was down by the lake. That was one of my favorite services we've ever done. It was beautiful, and we had had so little meeting together that just like being together outside and we shared communion together, and we sang and had instruments like Easter Sunday. [emotionally] It was beautiful. It was beautiful. I learned how to do all kinds of technical things I'd never done before. I shot lots of little videos on YouTube that I'd never done that before. And we'd get together and we'd made little videos of the scriptures that the kids did. And we moved around, did the little things from different people's houses. And it was

beautiful in its way. I made— a bunch of us got together and we made Advent Christmas packets for all the families that had activities for families to do together over the Advent season so that they could and, you know, they made little advent candles to light and activities for the kids and the adults to do as families. And another one for Easter and Holy Week. And I remember I ordered Palms for Palm Sunday that people came and they picked up their palms and they waved the palms during the worship service. And so we did those things.

But it was also not good. And I think it is especially challenging for children— to engage on Zoom for kids. They were doing that all weekend at school and they just they suffered, right? They just suffered. And also, we learned that as a multi-language group church, the things that we do as a church community that make it possible for us to be multilingual are we sing together, we dance together and we eat together. And we couldn't really do any of those things together. And so it really was very difficult for us to hold our multi-language ties. Even though we ended up having separate zooms for like language-based zooms. So, that was painful. And now we're finding our way back to each other this last year. We're still finding our way back, which is good.

But I will say, like my Nepali pastor colleague, because everyone in the world was learning how to use Zoom, he started to be like— he teaches at a seminary in Kathmandu, and he preaches at congregations that are in Nepal and Hong Kong and London. He's been doing and he's able to do that because all of these churches have moved online. And it's allowed him to be a kind of now he's a pastor who does all this leadership development for young pastors who are just in their earliest years of ministry that he can mentor them, coach them, teach them, train them, offer them support in all these different ways that he could not have done in 2018 or 2019. And our East African adults, for a lot of them because of their work schedules, because of kids' stuff, and just because of not feeling comfortable going out at night, prior to COVID, it was really hard for them to have midweek prayer services, and they started doing this Friday night Zoom prayer call, which continues to this day. And because they're all doing it from their homes and nobody feels uncomfortable, like they have to go out in the cold, in the dark of Chicago winters or anything, it continues. So that's really good. I'm so grateful for that.

I think that in the United States, there has been a seismic shift in how, especially people that were born in the United States, non-immigrants or maybe second-generation immigrants, they start to follow the more U.S. pattern. But Church has had a major demographic shift over the course of the last 50 years. And over the course of the last, since I've been a pastor and COVID sped up a lot of patterns of how it is that people engage with each other, how people do community with each other, where the locus of their people are. There's been a lot of disturbing things that have happened in the U.S. Church that have, I think, caused a lot of people to just be really cynical about what the role of the church is in the world. Church. Is church a safe place for children? Is church a safe place for queer kids and adults? Is church a place where churches are actively peacemakers in our neighborhoods, in our world? Like those are those are real, open questions right now.

And I think because of all that it's been really that the church is shifting. COVID gave a lot of people permission. Like people, people who were sort of on the edge of like, I don't know how I feel about church. Then COVID disrupted their patterns. And so people that were had a lot of questions. But then, church was just a part of their rhythms and their families. Then COVID disrupted those patterns and their rhythms and gave people permission to not come to church

because of all the other reasons. And so it just shifted attendance patterns. I think there's people that probably have left church because of COVID, and I don't know if they'll ever come back. And there's other people that maybe they're what you would call a regular attender in 2019 was somebody who came to church maybe three times a month. Now, you would say somebody who comes to church once a month is a regular attender. So, it's shifted. And I suspect that a lot of those patterns are very long-term patterns for a lot of people, especially in a city like Chicago.

BAS: All right. So we're reaching the end of the interview. Is there anything in particular you would like to share with me that we haven't gone over so far?

KJ: Oh gosh. I mean— [laughs]

BAS: [laughs] Go for it.

KJ: I talked a lot. I feel like I've covered the questions you have. So, no. Are there other things that you want to know about our church or about this space, or about how this fits in your project?

BAS: Let's see. Okay. How would you pitch Living Water? Someone comes in and says, hey, I'm looking for a church to join.

KJ: Mm hmm.

BAS: And they had 30 seconds. What would you say?

KJ: Well, I would really size up the person, who they were first, and they would pitch it differently. I think it's an easy welcome to people who are relatively recently arrived to Chicago and they're Nepali Bhutanese, East African Cambodians. There's fewer and newer arrivals from Cambodia, but. Because this is a real lively church community for people who are born in the United States. I think this church is most attractive to people who have a real desire and a vision for a church that is multicultural, multiethnic, intercultural, and really wants to be investigating what does it mean to be a follower of Jesus in that kind of a diverse context, where our cultural assumptions are always being challenged by worshiping with Christians from all over the world.

BAS: All right. Thank you for sitting down with me. I am just going to get us about 30 seconds of ambient noise. I can hear whatever "that is" happening right now.

KJ: [laughs] Sorry about that.

BAS: [laughs] It's okay. We're just going to lay this down and we're gonna get some silence for a little bit and then we'll turn off the recording.