

6/1/2020

Hed: Church Services Continue With Broadcasted Accordion Accompaniment

By: Matthew Musacchia

When the COVID-19 pandemic shut down church services, Judy Larson, who lives in a North Dakota town near the SD border, was one of those who helped to keep the church music alive. Larson, a member of the local Reformed Presbyterian Church, is a singer and accordion player, and during the time churchgoers were at home she worked with her pastor, Spencer Allen, to broadcast their services over the radio.

To recreate the usual hymns and songs, Larson and her family first repurposed an outbuilding on their farm and turned it into a recording studio, complete with sound equipment and “ratty blankets or quilts” hung up to dampen the sound. Then she and her family (husband Todd, and children, Nora, 19, Rachel, 17, Eli, 15, Joe, 13, and Anna, 10) would record the hymns selected by their pastor. Her husband played the bass, as well as both electric and acoustic guitars, and all provided vocals. The only thing missing was a piano, so Larson used her accordion.

“It was just a necessity” said Larson. “I mean, we were going to be recording the church services, and the music for the church services.... it’s just really hard to cover things like the doxology without some sort of keyboard instrument.”

In this way, Larson and her family recreated the music normally heard during Sunday worship. Allen would record the sermon and other parts related to his duties, and splicing these together, an entire service was created. This would be broadcast over the local radio, as well as was put up on the church’s Facebook and Youtube page.

Larson herself had only taken up the accordion during the last five years. However, beginning last summer, and continuing until May, she received a grant from under the North Dakota Council on the Arts Folk Arts and Apprenticeship program, to apprentice with noted North Dakota musician Chuck Suchy to further her skill. Learning traditional music from North Dakotan settlers, Larson became more well versed in styles of Germany, Bohemia, and Norway.

While the songs she learned with Suchy weren’t the same as the hymns she played on the radio, the apprenticeship did help in other ways.

“I guess just knowing that people worked with what they had and even if you weren’t the best player in the world.” said Larson. “You were the music they had for Saturday nights and so you did your thing.”

For Larson, one of the most rewarding parts about this is that because the service was sent out over the radio, people who normally would not have access to hearing the service on social media would be able to listen as well. Larson said this was especially important to elders, and that she would receive good feedback from them, such as cards and phone calls.

“We actually got some cards in the mail from some of the older congregants that just really thanked us for doing the music and making it seem like they were really there, rather than just having a sermon on Youtube, which they probably wouldn’t have accessed” she said. “By making the entire service with

music and the liturgy and the work of the people, so to speak that helps them feel.... they're still a part of something they can participate along."

In connecting the broadcasts to what she had learned in her apprenticeship, Larson drew one parallel.

"Just like music brought people together to participate in something together," she said, "the dances like in the Bohemian hall in the past, these church services brought people together in a way that they can participate together even though they had to stay separated."

The broadcasts ran from the middle of March and ended on May 17th.