



The COVID-19 pandemic has left many Indigenous parishes without clergy to perform funerals. In response, the church's Indigenous ministries department has provided online training for local lay leaders to perform them instead.

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By Joelle Kidd

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ZOOMING IN

ZOOM-BASED TRAINING SEEN AS BLESSING FOR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN LOCKDOWN

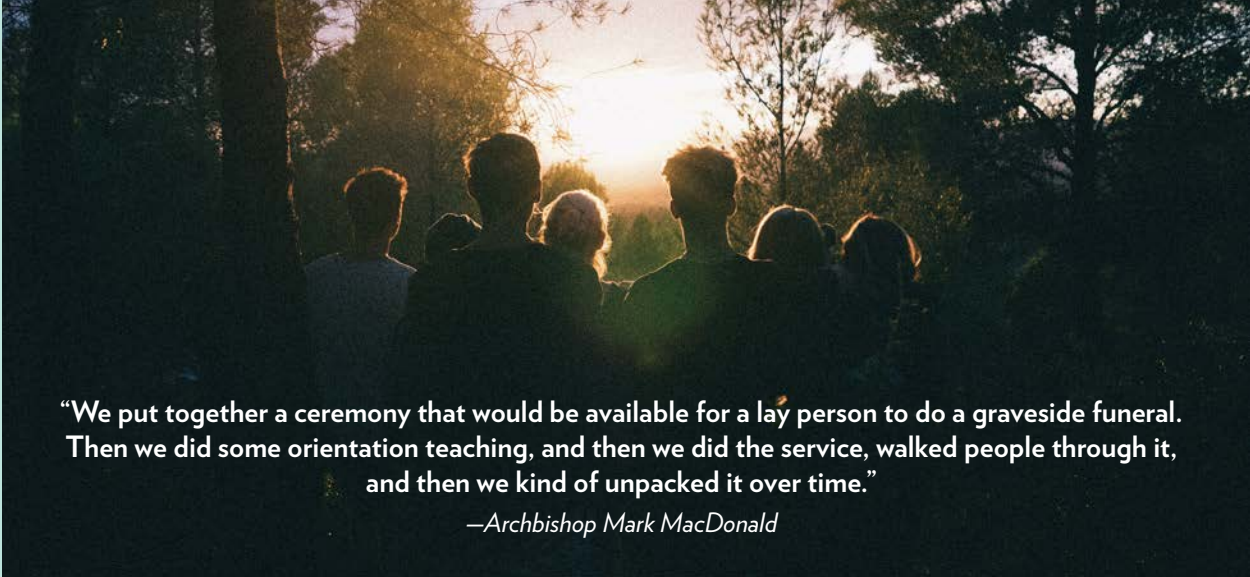
For the Anglican Church of Canada's department of Indigenous ministries, embracing Zoom videoconferencing technology has provided a solution to a major problem in the time of COVID-19 lockdowns. As many Indigenous people across the country have [set up blockades](#) to prevent the spread of COVID-19 into their communities, priests that usually serve multiple communities can no longer travel, leaving some parishes without a priest to perform funerals.

In response, the department began a five-week series of Zoom training sessions meant to equip lay leaders to

perform graveside funerals in their home communities.

The lockdowns have revealed, in addition to this immediate need, "a longer-term crisis of [not] having people in our more remote communities equipped to do services in their own communities," says National Indigenous Archbishop Mark MacDonald. Training more lay leaders would provide valuable support for these communities while allowing the ordained clergy to better do their work, he says.

The idea was drawn from a set of priorities obtained by asking Indigenous leaders what they need from the



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PHOTO: DAAN STEVENS / SHUTTERSTOCK

church right now. MacDonald says it was brought before the Indigenous House of Bishops Leadership Circle and received great support.

The team of facilitators that came together to create and teach the program included MacDonald; Canon Ginny Doctor, coordinator for Indigenous ministries; Bishop Joey Royal, director of the Arthur Turner Training School in the diocese of the Arctic; the Rev. Kara Mandryk, coordinator of the Henry Budd College for Ministry in the diocese of Brandon; the Rev. Ray Aldred, interim dean of the Vancouver School of Theology; and Dorcas Mamakwa, representing the Dr. William Winter School for Ministry in the Indigenous Spiritual Ministry of Mishamikoweesh.

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The training sessions were held by Zoom every Tuesday, and around 20 people attended each time, MacDonald says. Sessions included half an hour of gospel-based discipleship, half an hour of discussion about the work of ministry, and half an hour teaching “on the basic articles of our faith—the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and that sort of thing. It was fantastic.”

MacDonald says they have received a positive response to the training and are planning to continue, next moving on to teaching visitation for the sick. “We’re hoping to expand it over time,” he says, noting the team would like to see more people from the Arctic and potentially set up a similar program for non-stipendiary clergy.

The often poor quality of internet connections in remote northern communities, MacDonald says, has made this a struggle. There have been workarounds: a group of about five lay leaders in Kingfisher Lake, Ont., were able to meet in person to join the videoconference, and others have been joining via phone.

“Those of us who are in the facilitator/leadership role, we have really enjoyed working together. It’s been a great blessing, and we’ve enjoyed it greatly,” says MacDonald. “We had a sense that it was going well. But then when we talked to the people, they really were enthusiastic about us continuing.”

These training meetings are among several new initiatives Indigenous ministries has taken on during the pandemic, including holding gospel-based discipleship meetings via Zoom three times a week, broadcasting gospel jamborees and holding an online service for the National Indigenous Day of Prayer June 21.

MacDonald says that he is certain these types of online ministries will continue, even once travel restrictions are lifted.

“Martin Luther, among others, said that there’s the right hand of God, which is, God tells you through scripture what you should do. But the left hand of God is circumstance. God might tell you one thing, explicitly in scripture, but sometimes circumstances tell you something [else] that you needed to know.

“I think that we are experiencing this pandemic as the left hand of God. I’m not at all implying that the pandemic is God’s plan. But God is using it in a good way, I think, to create some opportunities that weren’t there before.” ■