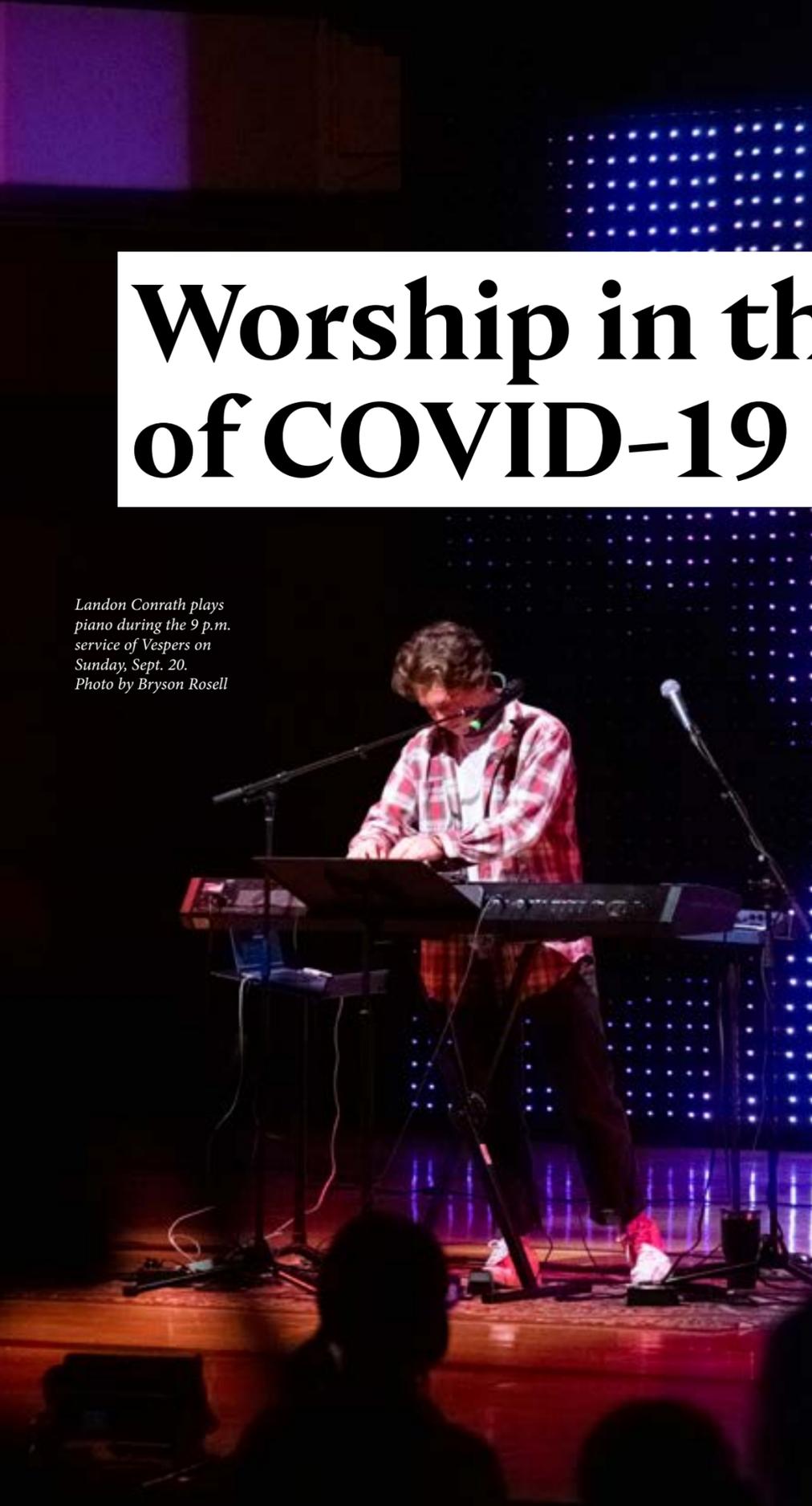


Worship in the age of COVID-19

Landon Conrath plays piano during the 9 p.m. service of Vespers on Sunday, Sept. 20. Photo by Bryson Rosell



With limited seating in Benson Great Hall, Chapel and Vespers this fall look a little different.

By Rachel Blood

Students waited outside Benson Great Hall in a line winding down the CLC hallway, six feet apart, at 8 p.m. September 6. As they entered, a student worker at the entrance scanned each person's cell phone screen. She was looking for their virtual ticket, something Vespers services at Bethel have never used before.

COVID-19 brought change not only to the academic aspect of Bethel, but also to worship. Chapel is now 30 minutes long instead of 45 on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, with an additional livestreaming option. This is partially because larger academic courses aiming to maintain social distancing now take place in spacious areas like the Great Hall and the Underground.

"I will always advocate for our community to come together to worship during chapel," said campus pastor Laurel Bunker. "It is not the only way nor the only space where we can worship. However, taking the time to worship and hear the word as Christians helps us to grow in our faith, heal from brokenness, address challenging issues from a biblical perspective, and to be refreshed."

Vespers now lasts 30 minutes instead of an hour. At the beginning of the semester, students were required to reserve tickets online for one of four identical Sunday night services. Following the September 13 Vespers services, the need for ticket reservations was eliminated along with the 7 p.m. service.

Assistant Campus Pastor Jason Steffenhagen commented on the change, saying the staff wanted to eliminate barriers that could keep a student from attending Vespers. Due to available seats at services so far, attendance policy is now first come first serve.

Services remain free of charge and are open to Bethel students, faculty and staff at 8, 9 and 10 p.m. The 10

p.m. service will be livestreamed through Facebook. Vespers rehearsals occur in the Lakeside Center chapel, where social distancing is possible. Everyone in the band except for the vocalists wear masks during these rehearsals.

According to junior Vespers worship team leader Kayla Brunner, multiple Vespers leaders tested positive for COVID-19, causing the rest of the eight leaders to be quarantined due to exposure from training. But Vespers goes on.

Brunner said her favorite aspect of past Vespers has been the community and fellowship that is created during worship

Brunner said that despite the pandemic making it difficult to achieve that same feeling of community, COVID-19 has given worship a new perspective.

"It's still worship, just in a different light, and I think it is so important to recognize and practice all kinds of worship," Brunner said. "We can still create a space with the intention of praising God together; it will just be more internal."

Bunker said she's experienced the Lord in unique ways during the pandemic, including seeing increased ingenuity, creativity, and generosity in the Bethel community. In March, her pastoral team started posting devotions online for the community. Since then, they've looked for ways to use live and online opportunities to encourage the community.

Matthew Runion, Associate Dean of Christian Formation, works closely with Bunker and Steffenhagen to prioritize Bethel's Christian focus.

"In these difficult times of high anxiety, I believe God wants us to draw near – to each other and to God," Runion said. "Ultimately, God wants us to know Him and rely on His loving abundance regardless of our circumstances. Communal worship is one of the places we

"The pandemic has not changed my desire or commitment to be a pastor. Nothing ever will."

LAUREL BUNKER, ASSOCIATE VICE PRESIDENT, CHRISTIAN FORMATION AND CHURCH RELATIONS

"Hearing the collective voices of your peers is truly breathtaking, and stepping into the reason behind it is even better," Brunner said. "It's amazing to know that we are there to worship God together, whether it's on stage or in the back row of the balcony. We are all here for one reason and with one goal in mind."

Bunker said that while being together for worship and God's word is a joy and a blessing, she's heard from many people who have found livestreaming to be beneficial. She's encouraged if people are tuning in, no matter where they are.

Because of the pandemic, congregational singing is not permitted in the Great Hall for the time being.

"At Bethel we love to worship together," Bunker said. "Last week, when we had the worship band up on Friday, even though we were not all singing out loud, it was beautiful. So happy to be back together. Preaching is different, but I still see faces in front of me, so I'm doing all right."

can seek that reliance as well as small groups, personal prayer and sacrificial service to others."

While Brunner anticipates difficulty leading socially distanced worship this year, her goal to reach everyone in the congregation hasn't changed.

"It's a new challenge, especially with the livestream option that we now have. But I think we are all up for the challenge," Brunner said. "We are all a part of United Ministries for the purpose of creating a space of worship and reflection, and that is what we plan to do for anyone who chooses to join in person or online."

Bunker hopes worship will return to normal in the future. Steffenhagen has been working with a team monitoring directives and opportunities through the Minnesota Department of Health. Bunker suspects that Bethel will be back to worshipping soon. Until then, she encourages the campus to do everything possible to worship God. **C**



Laurel Bunker

- × Associate VP of Christian Formation
- × Church Relations and member of the President's
- × Executive Leadership Team
- Primary chapel preacher



Matt Runion

- × Associate Dean of Christian Formations and Church Relations
- × Leads missions and discipleship ministries on campus while providing care and community for Missionary Kids, Third Culture Kids, and International Students.



Jason Steffenhagen

- × Assistant Campus Pastor
- × Head of discipleship initiatives across campus.
- × His passion is to help students become fully committed disciples of Christ by taking the journey alongside them.