

Wedding business in flux as peak season is canceled due to COVID-19

By Katie Anderson

For The Advertiser-Tribune

Jennifer and Major Clark modeled their elopement services business after their own marriage experience.

The Charles Town, West Virginia couple eloped in 2013, when they drove to Niagara Falls, New York, to get married. Two years later, they started the company Elopers, which provides elopement and wedding services to couples in their state as well as Maryland, Virginia and Washington D.C.

Jennifer said there were courthouse wedding options and big venue options, but not many options for couples that wanted to spend less than

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\$5,000 on a small gathering.

"We wanted to give couples some of the traditions they want on their wedding day, which they might not get at a courthouse," she said.

Major does most of the officiating, while Jennifer, who has a background in marriage and family therapy and psychology, offers pre-marital courses.

The business was go-

ing great until last month, when the COVID-19 pandemic shut down everything in peak wedding season. Even the courts are closed throughout most areas, making it impossible for couples to even get a marriage license.

"Our business is putting people together, and this pandemic has asked us not to bring people together," Jennifer said.

"A lot of them have been able to reschedule," she then added, "so that's great."

The husband/wife duo said they're rescheduling some services for the summer and fall, but there's still so much uncertainty over what regulations will be in place.

"We really want to be

safe and make sure our couples are being safe," Jennifer said. "The unknown is the scariest thing for a lot of our couples. It's hurting that the top of our wedding season is being canceled."

A ceremony on March 11 was their last job before the pandemic hit, and two days later, the couple had to lay-off three part-time employees. Major stopped officiating, though Jennifer still does pre-marital courses online.

Major explained that this is the first year they did more ceremonies in the winter than they did in the spring.

"We're doing the best we can to hang tight and hold on and look out for our couples," he said.

They've also offered refunds to couples that covered anything outside of their initial security deposit.

"This is my full time job; this is it for us," Jennifer said. "We've had some great couples stick with us that are being very patient."

For some couples hoping to be married very quickly, postponement broke their hearts. Jennifer said one of their couples was hoping to plan something quickly because a loved one was sick.

While waiting for the world to return to normal, however, the loved one died as a result of COVID-19.

"We've heard heart-breaking stories like that,

where all the refunds in the world won't bring that person back," Jennifer said. "It's their wedding day, and some of them have been looking forward to this day all their lives."

Even the Clarks themselves miss being able to do the work that's been so fulfilling in their lives. Major said he became a wedding officiator as a way to honor his mother, who died when he was 12.

"It hurts me to my heart every time someone has to reschedule, because I look forward to it," Major said. "I definitely miss it. It is my joy and I love doing it."

Churches feel financial effects of pandemic

By Evan Bevins

For The Advertiser-Tribune

With parishioners no longer gathering at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Jamestown, N.Y., during the COVID-19 pandemic and some dealing with lost jobs or reduced work hours, the Rev. Luke Fodor knows his parish will feel the financial effects of the crisis as much as anything else.

"There are a number of folks who are impacted and aren't able to give what they expected to give," he said.

But it's also a chance, Fodor said, for the church to recognize the scriptural concept from 1st Corinthians 12, that if one part of the body suffers, every part feels it.

"It's a moment where, sure, we're hurt as a church and our funding's cut, but it's not about us, it's about helping" those in need, he said.

Many churches have had to forgo in-person services to follow government orders not to gather in large groups and maintain social distance of at least 6 feet between individuals in an effort to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus. Even so, they continue to offer services through various online platforms and other methods while they also try to meet the needs of people in the community.

Church offerings typically support minister and staff salaries and benefits, church utility costs and expenses and ministries from local food pantries to international missions. That said, people can continue

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to contribute online and by mail, but Fodor said the absence of free-will, open-plate offerings has had an impact.

St. Luke's has not had to lay anyone off, Fodor said, but they are asking staff to work from home when feasible and they continue to support those who cannot support themselves.

"It is likely (we) will be able to continue to make payroll for several months before we reach a difficult decision point," he said.

Contributions for March to ministries organized by the West Virginia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church saw about a 3 percent decline compared with the same month in 2019, said Jamion Wolford, treasurer for the West Virginia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. Informal polling of conference treasurers around the country suggests that the decrease is consistent with others, he said.

Statistics weren't available at the individual church level, Wolford said, but anecdotally, he's heard both positives and negatives when it comes to what churchgoers give.

"We have heard stories of dedicated, long-term church members giving more than normal and stories of expanded

online ministries encouraging donations from around the world," he said via email. "However, we have also heard from mid-size churches that were already in tenuous financial positions being distressed by the mitigation measures."

Larger churches have adapted to or have already been using online giving platforms, while smaller churches "seem to have a consistent core of donors less affected by the societal changes caused by COVID-19," Wolford said.

If offerings continue to be reduced, the church will "look for how we can support each other and share in the struggles presented by the current social and economic conditions," Wolford said. "Churches and the Conference are finding new ways of sharing the message of Jesus Christ through new and sometimes less costly methods. ... However, if support declines dramatically, churches and the Conference may have to limit or suspend some ministries."

Catholic churches in West Virginia have likewise seen a financial impact as well as efforts to help among parishioners, said Tim Bishop, director of marketing and communications for the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston.

"We have also received a great number of letters and phone calls from the faithful to ask how they can continue to financially support their parishes during these unprecedented times," he said in an email.

At www.dwc.org, the

diocese established a means by which parishioners can contribute online to churches that don't already offer that option.

A number of parishes have seen an increase in donations of food and cleaning supplies to help those in need, Bishop said, and existing services have expanded. The Priest Field Pastoral Center in Kearneysville, W.Va., has been utilized — in conjunction with Jefferson County officials — as a homeless shelter since many such facilities there have closed, he said.

Asked how they would address shortfalls, the Diocese spokesman said that Bishop Mark Brennan "remains committed to supporting parishes and schools throughout the Diocese during these times."

Pastor Tom Orth, of Grace Lutheran Church in Alpena, Michigan,

said not only have church members continued their offerings with in-person services suspended, but other community members have donated needed items as well.

"I occasionally will find bags of food outside our entryway," he said. "People are stepping up and responding and taking care of each other."

Those items are placed in the church's "Little Food Pantry," an exterior container where people can take and leave items as they need and have them, or in cabinets inside the vestibule, which folks can also access around the clock.

As for the church budget, its average need was met the first two weeks of April. That wasn't the case when services were first suspended, but Orth said funds don't come in evenly during a month, even under normal circumstances.

"Our experience right

now is that people are giving," he said, noting some have even made extra contributions.

At Ravenswood Free Will Baptist Church in West Virginia, the Rev. Pastor Chris Skeens said members have been mailing in their offerings or leaving them in a designated offering plate at the church without coming into contact with others. Although they've been streaming content on social media, the 80-member church does not have an Internet giving mechanism, though that may be something they consider.

Giving has actually increased, Skeens said, although at least part of that is seasonal, due to people receiving tax refunds.

Holy Week programming was offered online and by radio, but so far, donations "have been slow," Skeens said.

"It's just different," he said.

NOTICE TO BIDDERS

Sealed bids for the Village of Bloomville Sidewalk Project, will be received in the office of the Seneca County Commissioners @ 111 Madison Street, Tiffin Ohio 44883, until 10:00 a.m. (local time) on 14th of May at which time and place they will be publicly opened and read aloud.

The opinion of probable construction cost is \$56,230.00.

Copies of the detailed plans, specifications and contract documents may be obtained or examined at the Seneca Regional Planning Commission office, 71 S Washington St, Suite 1104, Tiffin, OH 44883 between 9:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. on Monday thru Friday. Questions shall be directed to Seneca Regional Planning Commission at (419) 443-7936 ext 1123 or emailed to cjwatkins@senecarpc.org.

A complete set of Bid Documents may be obtained from Seneca Regional Planning Commission for a non-refundable fee of \$10.00 made payable to Seneca County Treasurer. Documents will be shipped, by FedEx only, with an additional payment to the County in the amount of \$5.00 or with a valid FedEx account number provided to the County for the shipping charge.

Should a bidder find any discrepancies in or omissions from any of the documents, or be in doubt as to their meaning, he shall advise Seneca Regional Planning Commission in writing, who will issue necessary addenda, or revised drawings, as may be appropriate. However, no request for clarification/information will be accepted after three (3) days before the date on which bids are due.

Attention of the Bidder is directed to the special requirements for wage rates, the hours of employment as ascertained and determined by the Federal Labor Standards Provisions, including Davis-Bacon wage rates and provided for in the laws of the State of Ohio.

Successful Bidder must be an Equal Employment Opportunity Employer, which prohibits discrimination based on race, creed, color, national origin, sex, age, handicap, political affiliation, or beliefs.

Proposals must be submitted on the form furnished and must contain the name of every person, firm or corporation interested therein. Bids shall be sealed and marked as **"Village of Bloomville Sidewalk Replacement"** and mailed or delivered as directed above.

Bidders are required to file with their bid a Penal Bond in the amount of 10% of the bid or a certified check, a cashier's check or a letter of credit pursuant to Chapter 1305 of the Ohio Revised Code in the amount of 10% of the bid. The proposal bond or certified check submitted with the bid will be held as a guarantee that if the proposal is accepted, a contract will be entered into. Proposal bonds and certified checks will be returned to all Bidders after the contract has been entered into and secured by a performance and payment bond of 100% of the contract with a satisfactory surety for the faithful performance of the work.

The successful bidder will be required to execute an affidavit relative to delinquent personal property taxes pursuant to the provisions of Section 5719.042 of the Ohio Revised Code prior to entering into a contract.

No Bid may be withdrawn within 30 days after the actual date of the bid opening.

The Seneca County Board of Commissioners (Owner) intends to accept the lowest and best bidder for the project but reserves the right to reject any and all, or parts of any or all bids and to waive any minor informalities in any bid, or to make the award in the best interest of the Owner.

Award of contract is also subject to the following provisions: Debarment, Suspension, Ineligibility and Voluntary Exclusion – 49 CFR Part 29. Domestic steel use requirements as specified in Ohio Revised Code §153.011 Buy Ohio Preferences: To the extent practicable, use Ohio products, materials, services and labor Ohio Revised Code §164.05 (A)(6)

Board of Seneca County Commissioners

Plan

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The total number of people tested in Ohio is reported to be 77,677, which includes people tested who voluntarily reported test results to ODH.

The age range of confirmed cases in Ohio has changed from younger than 1 to age 106, and 50% are male and 50% are female.

In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

website Friday reported 661,712 total cases — 660,430 confirmed and 1,282 probable. And it reported 33,049 total deaths — 28,832 confirmed and 4,226 probable. Those numbers compare to 632,548 total cases and 27,012 deaths Thursday, 605,390 total cases and 24,582 deaths Wednesday. Statistics are from all 50 states, plus the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, Northern Marianas and U.S. Virgin Islands. The most cases are in New York, which are reported to be more

than 216,000.

Worldwide, the Coronavirus Dashboard (ncov2019.live/data) Friday reported the number of cases remained at 2.17 million, the same as Thursday, after topping 2 million Wednesday.

The site reported more than 145,000 people have died, up from 144,000 Thursday, 133,000 Wednesday, 125,000 Tuesday and 118,000 Monday. The site reported more than 546,000 people have recovered and more than 18.1 million have been tested.

Help

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One financial resource available for small businesses is the Paycheck Protection Program through the Small Business Association. This loan has been created to help businesses keep their workforce employed during the COVID-19 crisis.

In addition to the PPP, there are other loan options for businesses including EIDL Loan Advance, SBA Express Bridge Loans and SBA Debt Relief.

The SBA has depleted its first round of funding

for small business loan efforts and is planning to add additional funding sources. Keller said he encourages businesses to keep submitting their applications if they have not taken advantage of the loan assistance the first time around.

Panelists also discussed the options they have for their customers and members including payment deferrals, done by a case-by-case basis.

"We are doing the best we can for our customers to help them get through this," Fultz said.

Sidor said it is important for customers and members to get in contact with their banks as soon as possible to get a head

of any situation so they can help get to solutions of the issues businesses are experiencing.

VanDette said it is important to note to also be patient with bankers and lenders as they are also seeing a high volume of applications and requests.

"We all have to think about the human aspect of this situation," VanDette said. "We are all feeling it in different ways."

For more information about the assistance available from SBA, visit <https://www.sba.gov/>.

For further information and assistance, visit www.tsepcoronavirus.com or text "Coronavirus" to 424242.