



## For Your Consideration

**Traci Blackmon**  
**Associate General Minister**

For the last two weeks, the National Mall in Washington, D.C., hosted the largest participatory art project in a quarter century. The project, conceived by Suzanne Brennan Firstenberg, is a memorial to U.S. citizens who've lost their lives to Covid-19. It opened with an installation of 690,000 small white flags, which took a team of 150 landscapers three days to complete. As people continued to die, more flags were added, and by the time it closed this past weekend, more than 790,000 flags filled the lawn. Many of the flags were personalized by friends and families of loved ones. Many more were unmarked, reminding us of the added cruelty of this pandemic that forced so many people to die alone.

This past weekend I spoke at a memorial service honoring the 3,000 lives in St. Louis and 10,000 in Missouri who are among those who've succumbed to this virus. We listened as names were read and stories were told of some of the victims who died isolated deaths in hospitals across the region. We listened as healthcare professional described their ongoing struggle to care for Covid patients in hospital systems where both staff and resources are stretched beyond capacity. In just 18 months, this nation has endured more human casualties than World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam War combined. The U.S. is reporting the most Covid deaths out of the 4.5 million deaths in 223 countries and territories worldwide.

And yet we still have not grieved collectively as we have done for previous tragedies. We have not set aside our political, social, and theological differences to work together to curtail this virus. When Covid-19 arrived in the United States, our federal government chose to ignore it. Instead of prioritizing the health of our nation, as we have done so many times before, we politicized a pandemic. We jeopardized our safety in favor of political talking points and accepted the unnecessary death of others as a reasonable price for individual freedom. Despite baseless rhetoric, it is worth noting that every living U.S. President has been vaccinated, as well as over 90% of Congress.

When social boundaries are drawn too narrowly, we miss a lot. We are less likely to see humanity in the losses; those suffering are outside the bounds of our concern. To become who we must be in this strange time of tremendous suffering, we need to be attentive to the groups of people who are suffering the most. We must weigh the temporary discomfort of a facial mask against the agonizing death of those who are most vulnerable. Perhaps if we understand the loss of 790,000 lives as our collective loss, we will cease bickering one with the other, feel our rhythmic communal breathing, and begin to recover something of our collective humanity.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erica Poellot is the Director of Overdose and Drug Use Ministries for the United Church of Christ - Director of Faith and Community Partnerships for the National Harm Reduction Coalition - and Senior Ministry Innovator at Judson Memorial Church in NYC.

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