

MINISTER'S REPORT TO THE BOARD  
JANUARY 26, 2021  
REV. DR. DAVID CHISHAM

Since we last met in November, we've continued to operate under COVID restrictions. These past few months have seen COVID numbers on rise in our community and within the congregation, as well. The list of those who've contracted COVID within the congregation has continued to lengthen, and sadly, earlier this month, Michael Mattison (Michelle Griswold's father) passed away due to complications related to COVID. On the positive side, I'm hearing reports that members are finding vaccinations; my suspicion is that most of our seniors will have at least the first, if not both, injections soon. We should not interpret that to mean we can immediately open everything back up. My understanding is that vaccinated individuals can still catch and transmit COVID to others, but the symptoms for those who've been vaccinated should remain minor or non-existent. To that end, we are still waiting for the State of Louisiana to roll back restrictions based upon community positivity and hospitalization rates.

In December we experimented with a Drive-in Service on Sunday mornings and for Christmas Eve. To me, attendance was low on Sunday mornings, though there was enthusiasm among those who attended; however, for the Christmas Eve service we had about 40 people in attendance. In fact, I think the attendance was better for that than the live service Christmas Eve. Though some expressed interest in continuing the service, in the long term it was not sustainable because setting up the service fell on my shoulders. Sunday mornings are already busy, and this added another layer of complexity. However, we will look at drive-in service options closer to Holy Week and Easter, perhaps a sunrise service on Easter morning. In short bursts we can sustain this as an option for those who trying to remain isolated.

Online viewership continues to hold up well. Though there is no way to determine exactly how many are actively engaging our online worship, for the year it appears that combined in-person and on-line attendance was around 196 weekly. We can extrapolate that that is a generous number; some of the views are casual viewers "just passing through." But I feel confident that we've picked up attendance amongst our own members and regular attenders: some who might attend in person only once or twice a month are finding us online almost weekly. We've picked up some local and out of state viewers, as well. Even after re-opening the sanctuary, and end of COVID restrictions, going forward we should plan to sustain that ministry with full support throughout 2021 and beyond

We've also set up an online giving portal. While it hasn't opened a flood of untapped income, I know that some are choosing to use that portal regularly—I can testify that my wife (my family's treasurer) likes it available so that as soon as paychecks hit our account she can go ahead and put in our donation. I encourage us to keep some type of online giving portal open into the future.

We are beginning to recruit volunteer assistance for next year, and while many volunteer programs remain in suspension, in the short term, we need help with worship

volunteers. Volunteers can help either in person or with video submissions (liturgist and children's sermon). If you haven't filled out a volunteer sheet for this year, as leaders in this congregation, I appeal to you to do so. As of writing this report we have 5 returned. I don't know how else to communicate the importance of this. In the office we did a patchwork schedule this past year, drawing from the 8:30 and 10:30 schedule, working around those who were remaining at home. Going into 2021 I would like for us to have a better sense of who is willing to help with worship leadership. We will have to revisit schedules when things open back up, especially if we decide to return to 2 weekly worship services, but for the moment we need to firm up our schedule through at least mid-year. Beyond this, I'm recruiting leadership for committees for the next year. Along with reactivating hospitality, outreach and worship, we set a goal last year to resurrect an Evangelism committee. By our March meeting I will have a list of committee leadership to report.

I'm also planning a special pilgrimage-themed Lent program for us. Rather than a devotional guide that we read in isolated meditation, this will encourage us to get out, get active and get connected with others. I'm looking forward to an uplifting Lent, Holy Week and Easter celebration this year!

#### LOOKING FORWARD TO 2021

One of the realities of rebounding from a crisis is that things don't just bounce back immediately. I learned this during the floods of 2016. Following a crisis it can take a year or more for the new normal to stabilize things, and that emerges only after six months to a year of various declines, whether material or psychological. I say this not to discourage us, but to counsel us not to become exasperated and discouraged at negative trends. A new normal will come, and the bonds of friendship and trust we establish as we weather the tough times together become the foundation for stronger bonds of friendship when things become easier.

I'm sure it's already on everyone's radar, but our finances will need to be closely monitored. The financial picture was already tight, but in late December we found out that our insurance rate jumped 15% (about \$6,000). We immediately set out to find cheaper alternatives but so far none are presenting themselves. We've been told by competing companies that our current insurance is both comprehensive and competitively priced. We've also heard that insurance companies have been hit hard by all the named storms and COVID, and those companies have raised rates accordingly. I'm thankful that we do have a strong history of financial oversight through the finance committee and Dak McInnis, who now has a year of leadership under his belt.

Coming out of COVID restrictions, we will need to look again at the Future Story we had cast for the congregation through the Epiphany program and ask if it is still accurate and valid, or if things have changed enough that we need to refocus our priorities. To remind you, we have three initiatives we were working on: 1) Community Health Initiatives (Vicki Krupala was leading that and we were seeing good signs of growth before COVID closed in-person meetings down); 2) Serving Our Seniors (we've begun gathering donated tools for a tool depot which would be used for cleanup and service projects in the community); 3) 'Starbucks Service' (was

still a plan on paper at the beginning of 2020). In contrast to these goals, over this past year we've seen alternative opportunities for outreach emerge, and we have used energy and resource to develop. Increasing our online presence wasn't a part of our future story, but it's clear that social media and online worship have helped us make important connections. We were forced into a single worship service. What are the signs that we keep that in place or consider returning to 2 services? Additionally, there is an ongoing conversation at the board level about re-visioning the use of space on our campus. This conversation invites us to a healthier and more substantial view of how our facilities might play a role in an alternative future story. We put a lot of work into our future story, but had to put it on hold because of COVID; one of the major downsides of putting it on hold is the loss of momentum we were building behind it. Do we circle around and rebuild momentum or has COVID changed enough that we need to take a step back and re-think priorities given the new opportunities and conversations?

Finally, I want to report some time off coming up for me and my family—we will be with family in Texas making up for time lost to COVID travel restrictions.

Over Mardi Gras break (February 13-16)—Tip Tipton will be preaching on Feb. 14.

The week after Easter (April 5-11)—Michael Elmore will be preaching on April 11.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Dr. David Chisham