

Belmont UMC Pastor's Report December 18, 2022
Submitted by Pastor Paul Purdue

Can you believe we have made it through this two-year slog through Covid 19? How wonderful that some 500 folks joined in our Feast of Lights inside our sanctuary with another 600 views online! It seems hard to believe that as recently as this June, the CDC Community Transmission Level for Davidson County crept back up into the "high" transmission category and we put up signs saying, "We ask you to please wear a mask indoors until community transmission levels decrease."

We are waking up to a new era of post-pandemic church life. The Barna Research group tells us that 40% of active churchgoers have shifted their regular Sunday worship routines, with many worshipping online or mixing in-person and hybrid worship, while others simply stopped coming to church. Our denomination is facing a season of division and schism that mimics the cultural and political divisions in the country. As we come to the close of 2022, we celebrate that we have made it through this long hard season, but we also know our post-pandemic reality is that we are not the same church that we were in 2019.

I rejoice that the Trust Fund is funding upgrades to our live-streaming equipment including the relocation of our live streaming hub out of the balcony. Your generosity has added staff leaders for this vital ministry. YouTube and Facebook church experiences lift the spirits of those who are sick, homebound, unable to drive, and folks not yet ready to return. Our live stream keeps members connected when they cannot make it to church. It shares Belmont UMC with neighbors and guests before they ever walk into our church! This technology links us together and shares Belmont's welcome, worship, and justice beyond our walls. The live stream is part of our new church reality.

Year to date, our in-person average attendance is 257 which breaks down into 22 in-person at 8:10am, 165 in-person at 10:30am, and 70 in-person for our Golden Triangle Fellowship. Our Golden Triangle members' in-person attendance has been steady all year, in-person worshippers at 10:30am have grown steadily over the past 12 weeks from a 147 average to 190. YTD, Belmont averages another 216 worshippers engaged online for a total average worship attendance of 473.

Bishop Sharon Christopher recently shared with the Friendship Class the analogy of the Hebrew people leaving Egyptian slavery. The book of Exodus tells the story of that sojourn. Bishop Christopher shared that as much as we might long to go back to Egypt or drink the old wine, we cannot; it is gone. (Matthew 9) Lament is an emotionally healthy response, but our post-pandemic longing for and trying to go backwards to the good old days in Egypt is a choice to slowly die. There is hope and joy in people coming back after the pandemic, but we should not believe that church attendance will soon look like it did in 2019, or even 1959. We must look forward to God's promises in a new land; without time, intention, innovation, and hard work, we will get stuck looking backwards.

Belmont's theology and worldview is welcoming and nimble. Our church experience stands together against a tide of growing societal unbelief or indifference, pop-culture church-growth, Christian nationalism, and an otherworldly faith that does little earthly good. Belmont strives to follow God's Holy Spirit that pushes us out of the building and into the streets with healing and good news for all people. How will we pivot to serve in a different social landscape? Our challenges range from reconnecting busy families to enduring discipleship patterns, to embracing diverse cultural expressions, to Nashville traffic and parking.

Will we look forward or backward? Will we seek to maintain and manage our status quo or take the risk of exploring new ways of being faithful? Will we exist to serve ourselves or be willing to change to become the Church that our neighbors need? It is one thing to invite a neighbor over for dinner, but a gracious host always asks their guests questions like, "what do you like to eat?", "is there anything you don't like?", or "do you have any food allergies?" Like every church, we must ask ourselves a deep missiological question - do we love our neighbors enough to risk change? I am not sure exactly what our neighbors need, what wounds some church has put on them, or even if they know they need something from God, but I know we won't find that answer in some church growth guru's latest book. We must wrestle with God's direction. The answer will arrive slowly as we prayerfully engage with Nashville. We must listen to each other and our neighbor's longings for faith, hope, love, shelter, welcome, friends, and allies. This is what Jesus did, eating and drinking with all kinds of people with whom church folks rarely crossed paths. Jesus met the most resistance from church folks who were deeply attached to their own ways. Jesus warns that unless we are willing to lose our lives (our folkways, traditions, idols) for the sake of the Gospel, we will not experience abundant life. (Matthew 16) Churches that tenuously cling to the past usually can't grab hold of the new things God is doing. (Matthew 23) If we are unwilling to let go of some trusted old ways, they have become our idols and will keep us from catching up with God's spirit. Gethsemane's faith requires churches' systems and people to surrender to God's will instead of what we want. (Matthew 26)

Rev. Tom Laney shared with our Ministry Council how the age of cultural Christianity died two church generations ago, and no one is sure just where the church is "at" right now. The pandemic has accelerated trends

already eroding regular church attendance. For example, young people can uncover deconstructionist theology on Tik-Tok in three-minute segments without needing to major in theology. We live in a different media, education, and faith reality. How will Belmont UMC help to foster a Biblically proficient, spiritual, life-engaging, and well-reasoned faith that offers alternatives to nones, dones, fundamentalists, and the disillusioned?

The pandemic threw us into a place of maintenance and adjustment to meet our worship and discipleship needs in new ways, leaving many leaders weary without huge visible victories to celebrate. It was hard to preach with 7 people in the sanctuary. Our staff was amazingly nimble. Who can forget an Easter service with a congregation of only choir members or tent Sunday school? Rev. Laney reminded the Ministry Council how Belmont poured that same energy into becoming a reconciling congregation and navigating the disastrous 2019 General Conference. Having answered our identity question and navigated the pandemic, what is next? No matter what we did well or poorly, the past is the past and the future now faces us. Will we either look back or lean into God's wide-open future?

About two weeks ago, our lay leaders from our Executive Team met to review the challenges of our 2023 budget which will likely rely on a limited use of reserve funds for 2023 and small cuts from the budgets we had hoped for when our Ministry, Mission, Outreach and Administrative team leaders submitted their budgets to Finance in September. There could be a variety of factors from inflation, members lost during the pandemic, to our calendaring decision to pass a budget in December instead of January, but right now we have fallen short of the projected budget by a little less than 3%. Today, we will need some faith and reserves to pass and then meet the 2023 budget. For several years, John Pearce has gently reminded us of our need to draw in more new members to help sustain or grow our current ministry footprint. We rejoice in 21 new families pledging this year, but we will need to continue to grow our giving to simply maintain where we are. Maintenance is not a sustainable growth model.

It was strange to leave a meeting about budget cuts with a sense of hopefulness. My hope comes because our Executive Team is leaning in and looking forward to our future ministry. I rejoice that our Ministry Council Steering Committee, Executive Team, Outreach Team, Advocacy, Lay Leadership, and others have begun these conversations in differing ways. Our MCSC has worked hard to create dialogue with all ministry groups and trust these conversations have laid some groundwork for future dialogue. I am excited to embrace our future with such remarkable lay leaders and our wonderful congregation.

Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; (says the Lord) now it springs forth; do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. (Isaiah 43)

Our lay leaders have agreed to begin exploring new ways of being the church. I pray that we will move beyond maintenance of our present church systems into innovative and adaptive community partnership beyond the local church. I pray that we will be willing to lose some things for the Gospel, for unless we are willing to loosen our grip on our beloved ways, we can't really see much less embrace God's new path. The pandemic has placed us in a new reality- Tik-Tok, Nashville traffic, collective busyness, and hundreds of other factors have put us into a new place; we can embrace the future or look backwards. We can do what we have always done or partner with our neighbors to see what they need. Dying to self-interest and beloved ways is not easy. Moses and the free people stumbled around the wilderness for years before entering into the promised land, but the journey was necessary to becoming new people. Good Friday was terrible but brought forth Easter. I look forward to this messy, hard, challenging exploration and hope it shakes us up and makes us think far beyond our stewardship needs and aligns our administrative and missional teams in common purpose. Let us shine the wonderful light of Christ-like faith, hope, and love out into the world by our good work. (Matthew 5)

Here are some things to explore together:

- How do we hear and partner with the needs of our current members?
- How do we hear and partner with the spiritual and physical needs of our neighbors?
- How can we partner with college students?
- Who do we exist to serve?
- Do we invite guests to do what we do, or do we plan ministry for our neighbors?
- Our mission statement is a beautiful statement of identity, but what is our missional purpose? What do we offer to our neighbors that only God can give them?
- How will Belmont help foster a Biblically proficient, spiritual, life-engaging and well-reasoned faith that offers alternatives to nones, dones, fundamentalists and the disillusioned?
- Are we aligning administrative and ministry committees around a common mission?
- Do our processes align to grow new members?
- How are we the best stewards of our building, especially under-used spaces?
- How might our spaces meet our neighbors' needs?

- During the pandemic, our energy was redirected; where does it need to go now?
- Churches will never be the same post pandemic; what does that mean for Belmont?
- How can we grow staff and ministry connections to support our church stewardship goals?
- What unites our staff and ministry areas to achieve common mission goals?
- Do we need to de-silo our ministries to create a more holistic strategy?
- How do we align the WDS ministry as a part of our ministry plan? What is a fair share regarding stewardship?
- Parking
- What does it mean to be in partnership with our Golden Triangle Fellowship?
- What is the role of technology in a communication, marketing, or evangelism plan?
- What does Nashville need? How can we partner to meet those needs?
- How do we link all the wonderful ministries Belmont UMC members are engaged in from the HERO project to the Waverly build to Community Care Fellowship and dozens more?

That is a lot, and more than any one team can do, but if we will all embrace this new moment and not clutch too tightly to the old patterns, God can do a new thing in our midst. And finally, we do have some great things to celebrate as markers of God's presence in our midst.

- We made it through this pandemic!
- Our church connection with our WDS is stronger than it has been in many years, both in terms of staff engagement and connection with the ministries of the church. Our back to school gathering and Easter egg hunt were beautiful times of connection. Lynne Collier is representing the WDS on our Executive Committee! This is great progress and partnership. Emma Bushong is leading our ministry with young people and teaching Spanish a few hours each week in our WDS!
- Our contract with SFM has allowed us to find savings on a variety of building projects and offered a much-needed system of reporting and tracking maintenance needs.
- Other than being flaming hot, our building a home in Waverly for a flooded-out family was an amazing time of ministry as was our young people's ASP trip.
- A Belmont UMC team is heading to Mexico to learn and serve together in January.
- Our children and youth choirs are back inside the building and growing. Amy Cooper is taking a well-deserved sabbatical this coming winter, and the very gifted Clay McWhirt-Toler will lead during this time. We pray Amy comes back with renewed vision and vigor! She is amazing as is her team of volunteer choir leaders!
- In September, our 8:10am worship service returned to its beloved chapel!
- As mentioned earlier, our Feast of Lights was an amazing worship experience with over 500 people in-person in the sanctuary and 600 joining online. Our choirs have been an amazing stabilizing force during the entirety of the pandemic; we are all deeply grateful to Gayle Sullivan, Amy Cooper, Robbie Jones, and our many amazing long-term lay ministry leaders.
- Our columbarium is a beautiful space of healing and remembering for those who have passed.
- Pastor Heather Harriss does amazing work with our congregational care and Sacred Path ministries. Heathers' beautiful eulogies honor lives and offer much hope.
- Our live streaming team is doing great work and updating equipment to allow us to reclaim the balcony and improve technology! We are thankful for Bruce and the team of lay leaders that do such faithful work.
- Our Young Adult Ministry continues to thrive; we are welcoming more college students than in many years. Emma Bushong is doing amazing work.
- How beautiful to have such a large Belmont contingency at Nashville Organized (for) Action and Hope and to host events like the "Built on Faith" summit. We are thankful for Pastor Ingrid McIntyre's work in helping us strengthen paths of justice and engagement.
- Our children came back into the building after 2 years in tents, on lawns, on Zoom; the reliance of both our staff and lay leaders is amazing. We give thanks for Pastor Kate Fields and everyone who leads.
- I am so thankful for Mark Hagewood who leads our administrative team with such grace, skill, and wisdom and for Angie, Anne, and Sara.
- I ask you to read the ministry reports from all ministry areas to see many other celebrations and victories.
- Perhaps the biggest thing we have to celebrate is our people. We are blessed with so many wonderful lay leaders. It is humbling to be part of such a wonderful, loving, dedicated, welcoming, wise, and hopeful team. I am deeply grateful for you all.

God is always ready to do a new thing.
Love, Pastor Paul