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# Emerging from the Pandemic as a Community of Faith: Assessing How the Life and Faith of Woodland West Church of Christ Has Been Shaped by the Pandemic and by God Through This Experience

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EMERGING FROM THE PANDEMIC AS A COMMUNITY OF FAITH:  
ASSESSING HOW THE LIFE AND FAITH OF WOODLAND WEST CHURCH OF CHRIST  
HAS BEEN SHAPED BY THE PANDEMIC AND BY GOD THROUGH THIS EXPERIENCE

A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE HAZELIP SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
AT LIPSCOMB UNIVERSITY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY  
RANDY TODD

NASHVILLE, TN

APRIL 24, 2023

This Doctor of Ministry Project, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the Hazelip School of Theology of Lipscomb University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Ministry.

EMERGING FROM THE PANDEMIC AS A COMMUNITY OF FAITH: ASSESSING HOW  
THE LIFE AND FAITH OF WOODLAND WEST CHURCH OF CHRIST HAS BEEN  
SHAPED BY THE PANDEMIC AND BY GOD THROUGH THIS EXPERIENCE

By:

Randy Todd


for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

  
Director of Graduate Program

  
Date

Doctor of Ministry Project Committee

  
Dr. Earl Lavender

  
Dr. John York

  
Dr. Dan Bouchelle



## ABSTRACT

This Doctor of Ministry project is a qualitative study that aims to explore and assess how the COVID-19 pandemic experience has shaped the life and faith of Woodland West Church of Christ and its members. Specifically, the study aims to explore how members of this local congregation sensed the pandemic experience shaped their faith as described in James 1:2-4. How have members sensed God at work in all this as described in Romans 8:28? How has it shaped their fears and hopes for the future? And has the pandemic shaped us in such a way as to motivate and move us to join God in pursuing renewal in our world and to rebuild what has been lost? It is hoped that one outcome of this project will be to inform our way forward as a congregation.

Members of Woodland West were invited to answer seven open-ended questions in an interactive congregational experience called a Day of Discovery, Hope and Renewal. The collective responses were reviewed and analyzed by six members of the congregation—three staff members and three regular members—in a collaborative effort to discern, understand, and explain the various beliefs and attitudes expressed by the members.

## DEDICATION

Andrea, the Lord has taken us on an incredible journey together. We have gone from a couple that once wondered if we will ever have any children to a couple who now wonders if (and when) our children will ever all leave the house. COVID brought us all together in ways we never imagined. Through it all I am so thankful that the Lord has taught us, and even now continues to show us, how to love, how to live, how to wait, and how to trust in the Lord's wisdom, goodness, timing, and faithfulness. Thank you for saying "Yes" not only to me, but to the Lord, to the church, and to the ministry of the Word of God. You have shared with me in all these things since the day we both said, "I do." I could not have done this, or any of the rest, without you. Thank you for the way you keep growing in Christ and challenging me to do the same. Thank you for the way you make yourself more beautiful to me every day. How do you do that? It has been a joy to learn together what it means for the two to become one.

Tyler, Darcy, Peyton, and Sawyer, I could not be prouder of any of you. You are gifts from the Lord and answers to many prayers. You have been a big part of my journey ever since you came into my life. I treasure every minute we had and will have together. Keep seeking and serving the Lord with all your heart and soul.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to acknowledge the countless people God placed in my life who taught me, shaped my heart and mind for the Lord, and encouraged me to pursue the things of God—beginning with my parents. Thank you for the incredible blessing you have been in encouraging and supporting me in every aspect of my life, and especially as a follower of Christ and a minister of the Gospel of Jesus. Your examples in the faith for how to be devoted both to your family and God’s family have impacted me deeply.

I want to acknowledge the incredible team of people who have been my partners in ministry and coworkers in the cause of Christ at Woodland West over the past fifteen years: Patricia Sayen, Rick Spear, our departed brother and friend, Jerry Ellis, Mike Bingham, Trey Laminack, Mary Jo Cochrum, Ken Smithson, Emily Burns, Michael Bowen, Jonathan Merchant, and Tim Burow. Each of you have been a blessing to me by your zeal for the work God has entrusted to you.

I want to acknowledge the entire congregation of Woodland West. So many of you have been a great encouragement to me to “Preach the Word” and be courageous in every moment of telling the Gospel truth. Let us live up to the calling to which God has called us in Christ! Special thanks to everyone who was able to participate in the various Doctor of Ministry projects over the past few years, including this one.

I want to thank everyone who has stepped forward and stepped up to lead and serve in the many ministries of Woodland West. The work of the church is the work of the church. You embody and embrace that. Whether you serve as a deacon, ministry leader or a ministry volunteer, everything you do makes a difference to someone. And I love that fact that Jesus is the

only one who knows which one of us is really “giving the most” for the cause. Whatever you do, you do it for him and to him.

I want to give a special acknowledgement to our dear brother, Mark Roath, who has crossed over to be with the Lord. When the pandemic hit, he and his volunteer A/V crew stepped up to all the challenges to get us ready to begin streaming our services live every Sunday for the sake of those who were not yet ready to get out and about. Cameron King and Rob Helsel were a big part of that effort. And our younger brothers, Brennan Spear and Sawyer Todd, dedicated a lot of time and effort during the eleven weeks to do the heavy load of video recording and editing every week so that the members could at least have a taste of church in the hopes that it would keep us all thirsty for more, for the time when we would come together again.

I want to give special thanks to those who worked with me in this congregational research project: Joni Walker, Juliann Helsel, Mary Jo Cochrum, Mike Bingham, and Trey Laminack. It was a labor of love for all of us. Thank you for your heart, insights and perspectives that informed and shaped this project to make it way better than it would have been without you.

I want to give a shout out to the incredible group of men who have served as shepherds of Woodland West during the past fifteen years. I thank God for your partnership in ministry, your friendships, your prayers, and your examples of compassion, patience, wisdom, generosity and faithful perseverance. You have made it a pleasure and a joy to learn, grow, and serve among those who smell like sheep.

Finally, I want to thank Earl Lavender, John York, and Dan Bouchelle for your willingness to relive the pandemic with me through your reading of this project and for sharing your reflections and insights. Your sharing in this journey with me, your mentoring and encouragement, were immensely helpful and encouraging.



To God be the glory in all things! The Lord has brought us through an incredibly difficult experience that impacted the life of everyone on the planet. May we recognize that the cross of Christ has the promise to do the same, for the good of all.

## SCRIPTURES OF PROMISE AND PERSEVERANCE

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.  
When you pass through the waters,  
I will be with you;  
and when you pass through the rivers,  
they will not sweep over you.  
When you walk through the fire,  
you will not be burned;  
the flames will not set you ablaze.  
For I am the LORD your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;  
— Isaiah 43:1-3 NIV

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.  
— 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 NIV

And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. — Matthew 28:20 NIV

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.  
— James 1:2-4 NIV

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.  
— Hebrews 12:11 NIV

Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. — James 5:10-11 NIV

Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. — Romans 5:3-5 NIV

You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. — Hebrews 10:36 NIV

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.  
— Colossians 1:9-14 NIV

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. — Ephesians 4:1-6 NIV

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.  
— 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 NIV

## PREFACE

### *Caveat Lector*—Reader Beware

*Caveat lector.* The first time you hear a term like this it sounds a bit ominous. As in, you do not want your doctor to walk in the room and in a serious tone announce, “I regret to inform you that you have *caveat lector*, a rare and unpleasant medical condition of the lower caveat (intestines) that you have never heard of because nobody wants to talk about.” But if you know a little about the Christian faith and church history, then you know that the person who steps forward at some point during the worship assembly to read a passage of Scripture has long been called the lector, which is simply the Latin term for reader. And if you are an avid reader and know a little Latin, you probably already know that *caveat lector* means “reader beware.”

I place these words at the very beginning, here in the preface, before you read any further, to warn you, the lector (reader): Read at your own risk and peril.

What follows is a congregational research project that explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the life and faith of a local church. The contents of this paper will cause the reader to relive all the pain, frustrations, and tensions, and the never-ending avalanche of new information and updates that came into our lives when the pandemic came into our world.

As I put all this information together, that is exactly what happened to me. I relived it all—the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly. It was an emotional experience that at times shut me down. It convulsed my body and brought tears to my eyes. I had to pause to let the emotions out and again lift my voice up to God in prayer. “Lord, we need you. Help us. Heal us. Save us. Guide us. Show us the way forward. Bring your kingdom into our lives and into your world. Thank you for helping and bringing us thus far (1 Samuel 7:12). Now go before us and

lead us into the future you want us to pursue together in the name of Jesus as we follow your lead.”

In this same way, you, the reader, will again be exposed to all the emotions and conflicts, doubts and uncertainties, which were an intrinsic part of the pandemic experience. Some of these emotions and conflicts linger with us to this very day, unresolved and unsettled. Even as the national public health emergency is set to expire in May of 2023, knowing what we now know, or think that we know, we remain unable to agree about what would have been the best path forward through this global health crisis.

We went through this experience together with the entire world, and yet at times we felt isolated and cut off from one another. Some of us are painfully aware of what we lost during the past three years. We know firsthand the ways the extreme measures we took as a society to slow down the spread of the virus changed and impacted our lives. We wonder whether or not the people we love will ever fully recover from the pain, confusion, depression, loneliness, anger, resentment, loss, and disappointment that crept into our lives, homes and hearts as an uninvited and unwelcome guest who ended up staying way too long.

We wonder and grieve—whether consciously or unknowingly—about the missed opportunities, milestones, moments, and experiences that were forever taken away from us. We had no voice, and we had no choice in any of this. These things were simply taken away from us. We were forced to adapt to a fairly short list of changes in how we go about our lives—primarily to avoid large gatherings of people and maintain your distance from others. This simple short list of changes resulted in an extensive list of changes and losses in our lives that deeply impacted everything and everyone. Even if we remain blissfully unaware of how much it cost us personally, there can be no doubt that it cost us collectively.

Remember all those television ads where the latest medication that promises to heal us, help us, or at least give us relief from *one* thing has a long list of caveats (warnings) about possible side effects? This medicine that is supposed to make you feel better may actually make you feel worse, only in different ways. Oh, the cruel irony of modern medicine. Sometimes the cure sounds worse than the disease, or whatever the chronic condition may be.

Speaking of cruel, there was a cruel similarity to the way the public health emergency played out in our lives. Under the advisement of the medical community, the “medicine” we were prescribed and given to save us from the virus had a laundry list of possible undesirable, unpleasant, and unfortunate side effects. Many of us felt immediate and intense side effects from all the COVID protocols. The prevalence and intensity of these unintended and inevitable side effects varied from person to person, family to family, and community to community. On the other hand, as with most medications, some of us were fortunate; we were able to take the prescribed medication without the undesirable side effects. For example, if you were already living the life of a recluse, little changed for you. But most of us live in and with communities. Most of us experienced some unwanted side effects.

Perhaps the most irritating and perplexing conundrum of COVID-19 was the way people could be infected with the virus and completely unaware of their infection. They were asymptomatic and clueless that they were now carriers of a potentially life-threatening illness. Even though it presented no symptoms—no pain, discomfort, or harm into their bodies and lives—it might bring irreparable harm, even death itself, to the next person. COVID-19 was a diabolical disease.

This observation leads to yet another interesting parallel. Some of us are painfully aware; we fully know how the pandemic invaded and disrupted our lives. We felt it. We know what it

did to us, we know what it cost us, and we know what it did to the people we love. On the other hand, apparently some of us were “infected” and impacted by the pandemic in ways that we have not yet realized. It is unlikely that any of us were truly asymptomatic. Even if we remain unaware of exactly how the pandemic experience has impacted our thinking, our attitudes, our values, and our behavior, it is incredibly difficult to believe that any of us remain untouched and unchanged by this epic experience.

*Caveat lector.* Reader beware. Take warning that the contents of this congregational research project will plunge you into the quagmire of everything COVID-19, in the hope that there is something important to be observed, detected, and learned from what happened and how we responded to it. God was with us every step of the way.

May the Lord bless you as you read, remember, and relive however you experienced the pandemic. May the Lord bless you as you read and realize perhaps for the very first time how others experienced the pandemic. And may the Lord bless us all as we put our trust in the God who has promised that he will never leave us, abandon us, or forsake us. Our faithful God will be with us to the very end of the age—working in all things for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose, and giving us the strength to face everything that life and Satan will throw at us.

Randy Todd

Arlington, Texas, April 2023

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The lead researcher for this Doctor of Ministry project completed his last required classes on the campus of Lipscomb University in Nashville in February of 2020. When he returned to Arlington, Texas to begin the process of firmly settling on a congregational project to pursue with Woodland West Church of Christ, COVID-19 invaded America and changed everything. The intention of completing the degree work that began in 2018 was put on hold. The COVID-19 pandemic experience not only changed everything about our lives, it demanded a lot of attention, time, energy, and additional prayer seeking the wisdom, strength and blessing of God for everyone serving as a minister in the context of a local congregation of God's people.

According to a study from the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, which surveyed 2,074 churches from 38 denominations, amid all the “technological adjustments, decisions about government and their own denominations’ COVID-19 restrictions on gathering, and greater requests for food and financial assistance, 67% of clergy said 2020 was the hardest year of their ministry.” Scott Thuma, a principal investigator in this project, said that he was surprised that 100% of clergy did not say that this year was their most difficult year in ministry. “You have to wonder, OK, so what year of your ministry was harder than the past year?”<sup>1</sup>

A qualitative study of pastors in the United Methodist Church attempted to take an in-depth look at how twenty-six pastors in North Carolina experienced the pandemic. The study

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<sup>1</sup> Adelle M. Banks, “Amid COVID-19, Most Churches Provide Hybrid Worship, Half Stopped Picnics” (Nov. 10, 2021). <https://religionnews.com/2021/11/10/amid-covid-19-most-churches-provide-hybrid-worship-half-stopped-picnics/>. Accessed on March 21, 2023.

found that the pandemic unsettled routine and previously taken-for-granted ways of doing ministry. Many pastors experienced this unsettled period as challenging and disruptive. The pandemic forced pastors to quickly learn new skills and take on new roles as they tried to figure out how to do ministry safely and effectively. Creating new practices and strategies of action was time-consuming, mentally taxing, and stressful.<sup>2</sup>

Not surprisingly, Barna Group reported that at the end of 2021 there was a significant increase in the percentage of pastors who had considered quitting ministry. In March of 2022 it was 42 percent. In January of 2021 it was only 29 percent. The primary drivers among those who have considered quitting were “the immense stress of the job” (56%), feeling “lonely and isolated” (43%), and the “current political divisions” (38%).<sup>3</sup>

Tish Harrison Warren, an Anglican priest, summarized and explained these findings through her personal observations as someone with many clergy friends.

In the Barna study, the top reported reasons for clergy burnout were the same ones that people in the population at large face: stress, loneliness and political division. But these stressors affect pastors in a unique way. Pastors bear not only their own pain but also the weight of an entire community’s grief, divisions and anxieties. They are charged with the task of continuing to love and care for even those within their church who disagree with them vehemently and vocally. These past years required them to make decisions they were not prepared for that affected the health and spiritual formation of their community, and any decisions they made would likely mean that someone in their church would feel hurt or marginalized.<sup>4</sup>

The typical church polity of Churches of Christ in America places the primary burden of these decisions on the shepherd or elder team of each local congregation. As a result, the impact of the pandemic on the stress and feelings of burnout among clergy, pastors and ministers in

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<sup>2</sup> Erin F. Johnston, David E. Eagle, Jennifer Headley, and Anna Holleman, “Pastoral Ministry in Unsettled Times: A Qualitative Study of the Experiences of Clergy During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Religious Research Association* 64 (August 6, 2021): 395. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-021-00465-y>. Accessed March 21, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Barna Group, “Pastors Share Top Reasons They’ve Considered Quitting Ministry in the Past Year” (April 27, 2022). <https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-quitting-ministry/>. Accessed March 21, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Tish Harrison Warren, “Why Pastors Are Burning Out,” *The New York Times* (August 28, 2022). <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/28/opinion/pastor-burnout-pandemic.html>. Accessed March 21, 2023.

America was also undoubtedly felt by those who served as shepherds or elders. This is a potential area of research and study that might yield valuable insight into how difficult and challenging this experience was both for individual shepherds and shepherd teams.

At Woodland West Church of Christ, the three ministers on staff—the preaching minister, youth minister, and children’s minister—are part of the congregational leadership team. They sit in with every shepherd team meeting and fully participate in the discerning process. But the decisions are ultimately made exclusively by the shepherd team. The ministers have a voice, but they do not have a vote in the decision. Even so, we were all in this experience together, as we met every week during the height of the pandemic in order to pray to God for wisdom and guidance, to digest the latest information from the health community, to share awareness of what is going on with the congregation, to strategically plan for how to equip and motivate the members of our congregation to pursue the kingdom of God in their lives during this time of so much uncertainty, to challenge our members to stay connected to one another and provide everything that is needed for the relational, emotional, spiritual and physical well-being of our members, and to ensure that all the members of the congregation were receiving the pastoral care they needed from the shepherds and ministers.

Nearly two years later, as we were attempting and hoping to fully emerge from the pandemic experience, instead of attempting to ignore everything God had been doing in and among us during the pandemic or attempting to focus our time and efforts on anything other than emerging from the pandemic, the decision was made to explore how we as a congregation had seen and sensed God at work among us as the Doctor of Ministry project. How has this pandemic shaped the life and faith of this congregation for better or worse? And how might understanding this inform our way forward with hope for our future?

## **Title of the Project**

The title of this project is “Emerging from the Pandemic as a Community of Faith: Assessing How the Life and Faith of Woodland West Church of Christ Has Been Shaped by the Pandemic and by God through this Experience.” The goal of the project was to invite the members of Woodland West to engage together in a series of questions designed to get everyone thinking about how God had been at work among us, and how we have sensed that the challenges and difficulties of the pandemic experience have shaped us, and hopefully both strengthened us and prepared us for moving forward in faith into our future.

The project was rooted in the congregational theme and agenda of 2021. We wanted to emerge from the pandemic better, stronger, and together. We challenged our members not to settle for falling back to the way things were, but instead to embrace the unique opportunity that the pandemic had given us to see the world and our lives with a renewed perspective that comes from above. We challenged our members to live differently, and that meant we had to make personal changes about how we go about our lives. We had gone through this epic season of forced changes in our daily routines. Now we were asking our people to choose change, to embrace and pursue change in and with their lives in the name of Jesus.

This project aimed to be about emerging from the pandemic as a community of faith that would be faithful to God’s call on our lives, not the call to the familiar and comfortable.

## **Statement of the Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to explore and assess how the COVID-19 pandemic experience has shaped the life and faith of Woodland West Church of Christ and its members. Specifically, the study aimed to explore how members of this local congregation sensed the

pandemic experience shaped their faith as described in James 1:2-4. If we believe the thesis of this passage—that trials and difficulties are beneficial for us, that the testing of Christian faith produces perseverance, and when this perseverance has finished its work, followers of Christ will be mature and complete—then we ought to expect to discern some healthy outcomes from the pandemic experience.

Along these same lines, the project aimed to explore and assess how members sensed God at work in all this as described in Romans 8:28. If we believe God works in all things for the good of his people, then how have we seen or sensed God’s working in all things COVID? How has both the pandemic experience and God at work in this experience shaped their fears and hopes for the future? And finally, how has the pandemic shaped the congregation in such a way as to motivate and move us to join God in pursuing renewal in our world to rebuild what has been lost?

It is hoped that one outcome of this project will be to help inform our way forward as a congregation as we emerge from the pandemic with the blessings promised in James 1:2-4 and Romans 8:28.

### **Basic Assumptions**

This project assumed the following:

- Personal relationships within the congregation have been disrupted by the pandemic experience.
- Members and families of the congregation experienced a wide range of thoughts and emotions brought on by the stress and uncertainties, and the conflicting and

constantly changing messages about what to do related to COVID-19, on top of all the usual stress and worries of life.

- Members of this congregation are a diverse group of people—ethnically, politically, and socioeconomically.
- The attitudes and beliefs of the members of Woodland West about the pandemic experience were shaped both by the shared common faith and the differing life situations of each member and his/her family.
- Members of Woodland West hold different opinions about whether or not, or how long, the church should have suspended in-person worship in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Members of Woodland West believe the bold declarations of James 1:2-4 and Romans 8:28 to be true.
- Most members of Woodland West embraced the challenge of their congregational leaders to explore and pursue the abundant opportunities to go and serve others in the name of Jesus throughout the pandemic experience.



## CHAPTER TWO

### INTO THE CRUCIBLE

The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold,  
but the LORD tests the heart.  
— Proverbs 17:3 NIV

See, I have refined you, though not as silver;  
I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.  
— Isaiah 48:10 NIV

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.  
— 1 Peter 4:12 NIV

In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.  
— 1 Peter 1:6-9 NIV

Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.  
— Deuteronomy 8:2 NIV

The above statements in Scripture are among those that American Christians like to avoid. We tend to skim over these passages in our personal private readings of Scripture. And we either fidget and squirm in our seats in the public hearing of these readings or we subconsciously and unapologetically dismiss them as irrelevant teachings for another time and place that we are fortunate not to live in. We have been conditioned by our prevailing world culture to avoid suffering and affliction, grief, trials, and tribulations—so much so that a prevailing teaching in

American Evangelical Christianity is this idea that God will rapture his people from the earth before the coming Great Tribulation that will happen before our Lord returns in glory.<sup>5</sup>

Against all of our discomfort at the biblical teachings about how God uses hardships and suffering and trials to test his people and to strengthen them are all of the plain teachings of the Apostles Paul and Peter. For example, in Romans 8:15-18, Paul wrote:

The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “*Abba*, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

For the Apostle Paul, sharing in the sufferings of Christ is an essential part of being a child and heir of God and a co-heir with Christ. If Christ first suffered and then entered glory, why do we think we will get a pass on suffering?

It is this shared suffering with Christ that provides the context for the beloved Romans 8:28. “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose,” or, “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose.”

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<sup>5</sup> Time and space do not permit unpacking this interesting teaching that is part of an evangelical theological system known as dispensationalism. The notion of a pre-tribulation rapture as it is taught today is the result of the influential thinking of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) and was popularized through the Scofield Reference Bible by C.I. Scofield (1843-1921) and the Ryrie Study Bible by Charles C. Ryrie (1925-2016). Rapture comes to us from the Latin *rapio*. Suffice it to say here that the only use of the Latin term *rapio* in the New Testament in the sense of God’s people en masse being snatched or caught up from the earth is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. In this context the rapture happens immediately *after* the Lord’s return and the resurrection of the dead in Christ. The writers of the New Testament did not teach another rapture that will happen before a great tribulation. The rapture only comes *after* the resurrection of the saints, not *before* the resurrection at the end of the age. For a summary of dispensationalism see chapter 8 of W. David Buschart’s, *Exploring Protestant Traditions* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2006).

Either way, God's people look for good to come out of the unlikeliest of places, including suffering.

In another familiar passage from Paul wrote of his great desire to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. We somehow manage to read this verse without hearing everything it so emphatically states. "I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:10-11 NIV).

Peter put it this way, "But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (2 Peter 2:20-21 NIV).

Finally, we come to the Word of God in James 1:2-4. "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." A few verses later another promise is added to this thought. "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him" (James 1:12 NIV).

People actually pursue physical hardships and trials that punish their bodies because they know it will make them physically stronger and increase their drive, stamina and energy. The desire to pursue suffering like the Apostle Paul did may continue to allude us, but whenever hardships and trials come into our lives, we are to take hope and courage in the Word of God that tells us there will be a beneficial result for those that faithfully persevere. This project is rooted

in the conviction that among God’s people we ought to expect there to be something good that came from all the pain of the pandemic.

Before looking into the crucible that was the COVID-19 pandemic as the primary context of this project, the next section will first explore the community context of this congregational research project.

### **The Congregation’s Community Context**

Woodland West Church of Christ is located in the center of Arlington, Texas, in the heart of the Dallas–Fort Worth Metroplex. The city has many centers of worship related to all sorts of faith. Churches, synagogues, mosques, Buddhist temples and meditation centers, Bahá’í and Sikh faith centers also dot the landscape of Arlington. Jain and Hindu temples are found in adjacent cities. One might say that the Metroplex is very religious.

According to a 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study conducted by the Pew Research Center, the prevailing faith in the Metroplex is currently Christian at 78 percent of adults. Non-Christian faiths account for 4 percent of the population and 18 percent fall into the category of unaffiliated religious “nones.” Faith and practice, however, do not necessarily go hand in hand. Of the combined 82 percent of adults claiming faith—Christian or otherwise—only 41 percent attend a religious service every week; 34 percent attend anywhere from once a month to a few times a year; and 24 percent seldom to never. Furthermore, when seeking guidance on matters of right and wrong only 43 percent indicated that their religion is what they look to the most for such guidance.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> “Religious Landscape Study: Religious Composition of Adults in the Dallas Metro Area,” *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/metro-area/dallasfort-worth-metro-area/>. Accessed February 20, 2023.

The Association of Religion Data Archives, by comparison, reports that there were just over 3.5 million religious adherents in the Metroplex in 2010, while the total population was just shy of 6.5 million people. In other words, 55 percent of the total population were described as religious adherents. Religious adherents included faiths outside of Christianity, such as Judaism, Islam, Hindu, and Buddhism. In these statistics, “congregational adherents include all full members, their children, and others who regularly attend services.”<sup>7</sup> It is also indicated that “[t]he 2010 reports contain incomplete counts of congregations and adherents belonging to the eight largest historically African American denominations.”<sup>8</sup>

The city is also home to the AT&T Stadium and Globe Life Field in Arlington, home of the Dallas Cowboys and the Texas Rangers, respectively. In addition to these shrines to professional sporting events, the city is full of many other football, baseball, soccer and lacrosse fields, golf courses, tennis courts, gymnasiums for basketball, volleyball, gymnastics, dance and cheer competitions, wall climbing, and venues for just about every competition imaginable. These events are featured most prominently over the weekend, including on the Lord’s Day.

The growing opportunities, desires and demands of athletics on families have a very real impact on church attendance and spiritual formation in America, the Metroplex, and congregations like Woodland West. The concept of honoring the Sabbath as holy, with Sunday as the Christian Sabbath, has been completely abandoned. Sporting events, family gatherings, weekend projects, and simply taking a day to rest and relax in the restful spirit of the original Sabbath—only without

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<sup>7</sup> The Association of Religion Data Archives, “Metro-Area Membership Report,” *The Association of Religion Data Archives*. <https://www.thearda.com/us-religion/census/congregational-membership?y=2010&y2=0&t=2&c=19100>. Accessed February 20, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

any remembering of the Lord—has taken over the first day of the week in the American way of life.

Demographically, 21 percent of Arlington’s population is foreign born, and the city breaks down primarily into four racial categories: 22 percent is Black or African American, 29 percent is Hispanic or Latino, 40 percent is white, and 7 percent is Asian.<sup>9</sup> According to a 2015 National Congregations Study, “In 2012, clear majorities of churchgoers in predominantly white congregations were in congregations with at least some African Americans (69%) or Hispanics (62%), and almost half (48%) were in congregations with at least some Asians. In fact, 82% of attendees were in congregations with at least some non-white presence.”<sup>10</sup> All these national trends are reflected in Woodland West. The majority of members are white who were born in America, but there are members born in various parts of the world, including Africa, Asia and South America, as well as those who identify with ethnic groups from these parts of the world but who were also born in the United States of America.

In 2019, Woodland West was a congregation of approximately 300 members, including children. Weekly Sunday morning worship attendance was 222. The congregation was led by five shepherds and three ministers—preaching minister, youth minister and children’s minister—whose working relationship is that of a partnership in ministry. There were 36 ministry leaders, nine of whom were deacons, and three additional staff members that served as the office administrative assistant, facility coordinator, and custodian.

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<sup>9</sup> United States Census Bureau, “QuickFacts: Arlington City, Texas,” Race and Hispanic Origin Table (2017). <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/arlingtoncitytexas>.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Chaves and Alison Eagle, *Religious Congregations in 21st Century America: A Report from the National Congregations Study* (Department of Sociology, Duke University, Durham, NC. 2015), 20. [http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/Docs/NCSIII\\_report\\_final.pdf](http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/Docs/NCSIII_report_final.pdf).

From the 1980s to 2001 average Sunday morning worship attendance dropped from about 350 to 280. Following an overall renovation of the worship space in 2001, the average attendance jumped up quickly to 308 in 2002 and approximately 330 in the years 2003-2005. Attendance then slid back down to around 300 for several years from 2006-2011. From 2012-2014, the average Sunday morning worship attendance held at around 280; then began a steady decline each year to the low point of 228 in 2019.

Theologically the congregation is very diverse. Many members grew up in conservative Churches of Christ of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and were deeply shaped by the core values of these churches with the emphasis on restoring the ancient apostolic church in doctrine and practice. Most of these members have moved past the legalism and hardcore patternism that was so prevalent in many of the Churches of Christ of that era. They are very thankful to have discovered the apostolic teachings of grace, mercy and forgiveness in addition to the teachings that emphasize God's call on our lives for righteousness, holiness, and good deeds.

There are also many members who have come to Woodland West having been raised up in other church traditions, such as Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Roman Catholic and the Dutch Reformed Church. Likewise, members have come to us from all over the nation and around the world, including places like Ecuador, Liberia and Vietnam.

In 2017 the shepherd team of Woodland West made the decision to go through a season of discernment with the congregation. To lead us through this process, the shepherds asked a small team of people drawn from our church family to work with Hope Network with the purpose of developing and articulating a Spirit-led dream for the Woodland West family through the year 2025 and beyond — growing disciples and aligning our ministries in its pursuit. This plan was announced to the church on July 2, 2017. The members of Woodland West were urged to join in a

season of prayer, fasting and sharing what God puts on our hearts as His calling and dream for this church family for this time.

Hope Network is a consulting group made up of Church of Christ leaders who seek to help local congregations through a wide range of challenges, including seeking a new vision or dream to pursue in the name of Christ. Jon Mullican, who was a co-leader of Hope Network at the time, worked closely with our team in walking the congregation through this dreaming and planning process.

Based on the conviction that God's Spirit lives in His church, the dreaming and planning team sought input from the church family through a series of organized exercises. They sifted through congregational responses, alongside community research that aimed to give an accurate assessment of our trends for our community in terms of demographics, faith, education, economics, and more. They brought their own thoughts and dreams into this process to arrive at a sense of God's calling for our congregation. As stated in a church bulletin at the time:

This will not simply be an exercise in dream-casting without purpose. Once God leads us to an understanding of what He is calling us to become and pursue as a church, this team will be charged with developing the concrete and executable plan of how we get there, once again through seeking input from the entire congregation, and seeking the will of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in everything.<sup>11</sup>

The dreaming team shared the conclusion of the discovery process with the congregation on Sunday, February 11, 2018. The dreaming team identified two resounding themes from the congregational responses to the discernment process in the form of questions.

“What heart-felt actions are we going to take to improve our church family that make us the most effective at serving our community and introducing them to God?”

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<sup>11</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, bulletin insert, July 16, 2017.



“How do we, as a body of Christ, cultivate deep, meaningful relationships that will spur us on toward our mission to seek and save the lost?”<sup>12</sup>

Three words were chosen to concisely communicate a vision for the future: know, grow, and go. The key words had the following ideas flowing out of them. Know God, know God’s Word, and know one another as the family of God. Grow in love, grow in faith, and grow in relationships. Go tell about God. Go show God’s love. Go reach our community.<sup>13</sup>

## **COVID-19 CONTEXT**

### **The Larger COVID-19 Context at the National, State and Local Level**

The goal of this congregational research project was to explore how the life and faith of Woodland West has been shaped by the pandemic and by God through this experience. God moves in mysterious ways that we do not always perceive or understand. His paths are beyond tracing out. His ways are unfathomable. Yet it is our deepest faith as those who confess Jesus of Nazareth as Lord that our God causes all things to work together for the good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose (Romans 11:33 and 8:28).

This truth is perhaps most easily discerned in the ancient story of Joseph (Genesis 39-50). God revealed that he had chosen Joseph for great things. As Joseph’s story unfolded, one dark and traumatic thing after another came into his life. His brothers attacked him intending to kill him. The Lord sent a caravan by and filled their hearts with greed, so Joseph was sold into slavery instead. The brothers ripped up the robe of honor his father Jacob had given to him,

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<sup>12</sup> “Woodland West Vision 2025 Congregational Report,” PowerPoint presentation, slide 6, Feedback from our Family, presented to the congregation, February 11, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> “Woodland West 2025 Dreaming Team Vision Outline,” pp. 2-3 and “Woodland West Vision 2025 Congregational Report,” PowerPoint presentation, slide 12.

covered it with blood, and covered up their scandalous behavior with a lie, breaking Jacob's heart in the process.

After spending some time as a household slave in a strange and foreign land, Joseph was falsely accused of a serious crime; another lie and another cover-up at Joseph's expense. God protected him from the death penalty and Joseph ended up doing time in prison. He helped some people in prison who promised they in turn would help him once they got out, but then they conveniently forgot their promise. Joseph was stuck in prison.

His life was dragging on with no hint that the dreams the Lord had given to Joseph had any hope of coming true. Yet all along the way, every time something bad came into Joseph's life the narrator of the story reminds us that "the LORD was with Joseph." Even though it does not appear to be true, even though all evidence is to the contrary, we are reminded, "the LORD was with Joseph" (Genesis 39:2, 21, 23).

We can only wonder where Joseph's faith was in all of this. Did he know, realize and understand as it was happening that the Lord was with him, guiding every situation to bring about in Joseph's life what the Lord had revealed to him in the dreams he had given to Joseph at the beginning of the story? Joseph's continued faithfulness to the Lord in all things, perhaps especially in the matter of Potiphar's wife suggest that he did. He declined the offer of Potiphar's wife by asking, "How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9 NIV)

At the end of the story, when everything God had revealed to Joseph in the dreams had been fully realized, when his brothers feared Joseph might finally seek his revenge now that their father had died, Joseph reassured his brothers that he understood what the Lord had done in all

these things. “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Genesis 50:20 NIV).

One of the things this congregational research aims to explore is whether we as a congregation have sensed that the Lord is with us, working all things together for our good, just as he did for Joseph. Before we turn our attention to the research, it is important to remind ourselves of the context in which this research was done.

COVID-19 changed our lives and our world. It completely disrupted our routines and patterns for living, our economies, our processes for the distribution of goods, our communities, and social networks. It reached into just about every aspect of our lives, including our most private and personal relationships. We were warned that this new, unknown, and deadly virus threatened to spread across our nation like a wildfire blazing out of control. If this were to happen, it would overwhelm the infrastructure of our hospitals and medical communities, and devastate the lives of countless families, congregations, companies, and communities in its path. Our universal efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19 and to protect those who were most vulnerable and at risk touched on every aspect of human life. For many, if not most of us, these efforts and the collective pandemic experience felt like everything, everywhere, and everyone all at once. It was an overwhelming experience.

The lasting impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic on families, mental health, societal norms, education, economics, family, marriage, faith, politics, and everything else will be studied and researched for a long time. It touched on everything, everywhere and everyone, even if it was not all at once.

## A Timetable of Key Events of the Pandemic

Our memories often fail us. The prolonged nature of the pandemic—coupled with the overwhelming avalanche of information, the unanticipated abrupt changes to every aspect of our lives, and the polarizing tensions that flared up as a result of these things—especially challenge our ability to remember with any sense of certainly exactly what happened when, where, why, and how long. The following timeline is provided as a pivotal reminder of how quickly things happened, how quickly things changed, how difficult it was to stay informed, and how challenging it was at times to keep our heads, our compassion for our neighbors, and our hope for tomorrow.

The following timetable of key events will focus primarily on events related to the United States, Texas and the Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington Metroplex, assuming that these events had the greatest influence and impact on the lives and minds of the members of Woodland West.<sup>14</sup>

**January 20, 2020.** The CDC reported the first laboratory-confirmed case of the 2019 Novel Coronavirus in the United States.

**January 23, 2020.** The Chinese government placed Wuhan, China, a city of 11 million people, under lockdown in response to the 2019 Novel Coronavirus outbreak.

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<sup>14</sup> Most of the items in this timeline can be found on the timelines produced by the following: The CDC at <https://www.cdc.gov/museum/timeline/covid19.html>, NBC 5 Dallas-Fort Worth, “Texas in State of Disaster as Coronavirus Pandemic Spreads” (March 13, 2020). <https://www.nbcdfw.com/news/coronavirus/texas-in-state-of-disaster-as-coronavirus-pandemic-spreads/2330093/>, and the timeline provided by *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations: Innovation Amidst and Beyond COVID-19*, a five-year research project funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. and led by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. This research can be found online at <https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/timeline/>. All these websites were accessed on February 20, 2023.

**February 11, 2020.** The WHO announced COVID-19 as the official name for the disease that was sweeping across the globe. The new name was an abbreviated version of Coronavirus Disease 2019.

**February 25, 2020.** The Lombardy region of Italy, the first epicenter of COVID-19 outbreaks in Europe, announced a complete lockdown in an effort to curb the rapidly spreading disease.

**March 11, 2020.** After more than 118,000 cases in 114 countries and 4,291 deaths, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic.

**March 13, 2020.** President Trump declared the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States a national emergency. The governors of 34 states had already made similar declarations of emergency or disaster. On the same day, Texas Governor Greg Abbott declared a state of disaster as the virus was rapidly spreading into the larger cities of the state. The governors of 11 other states made the same kind of declarations on this day, bringing the total number of state declarations of emergency or disaster to 46.

Locally, Tarrant County Judge Glen Whitley announced a Declaration of Local Disaster Due to Public Health Emergency on this same day. Recommendations included events with more than 250 people were to be cancelled. Fort Worth and Arlington Independent School Districts both announced on Friday, March 13, that they were extending their respective spring breaks by two weeks. These declarations followed the proclamation of Dallas Mayor Eric Johnson on Thursday, March 12, declaring a local state of disaster for the city, shortly after a countywide ban on large public gatherings of 500 or more people had been announced.

**Sunday, March 15, 2020.** National Day of Prayer as declared by President Donald Trump in response to the COVID-19 health emergency.

**March 16, 2020.** President Donald Trump issued national guidelines limiting gatherings to 10 people or less. Locally, Dallas and Tarrant Counties responded by closing down bars and ordering restaurants to move exclusively to pick-up orders on March 17 and March 19, respectively. For Tarrant County, the new emergency declaration also limited other businesses to a total occupancy of “either 125 people or 50% of the capacity on the certificate of occupancy, whichever was less. This limitation applied to event centers, hotel meeting spaces and ballrooms, retail sales and services, convenience stores, plazas, places of worships, common areas in malls and businesses in malls.”<sup>15</sup>

**March 24/25, 2020.** As the spread of COVID rapidly increased in the Metroplex in spite of these initial guidelines and limitations, both Dallas and Tarrant Counties gave stay-at-home orders for everyone but essential workers. The counties also provided COVID protocol guidelines related to businesses that could allow their employees to safely work in environments where distancing could be practiced. These stay-at-home orders included houses of worship.

On the very same day as the stay-at-home order was issued in Tarrant County, President Trump made statements that he wanted the nation reopened by Easter Sunday, April 12.<sup>16</sup> Simultaneous to the abrupt shutdown of Tarrant and Dallas Counties was the immediate tension of how long this shutdown should last and everyone’s desire for this to be over sooner rather than later, if possible.

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<sup>15</sup> “Fort Worth Bars, Dine-Service at Restaurants to Close with Enhanced COVID-19 Restrictions” (March 18, 2020). <https://www.nbcdfw.com/news/coronavirus/watch-fort-worth-expected-to-enhance-covid-19-restrictions-wednesday/2333655/>. Accessed February 20, 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Kevin Breuninger, “Trump Wants ‘Packed Churches’ and Economy Open Again on Easter Despite the Deadly Threat of Coronavirus,” *CNBC* (March 24, 2020). <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/24/coronavirus-response-trump-wants-to-reopen-us-economy-by-easter.html>. Accessed on February 20, 2023.

**March 31, 2020.** Texas Governor Greg Abbott issued Governor’s Executive Order GA 14. This order shut down all non-essential businesses across the state through April 20. Schools were to remain closed and offer education exclusively online until May 4.

In response to the growing concerns about religious liberties and the exclusion of houses of worship as essential services in previous orders, this order also clarified how Texas would categorize religious gatherings moving forward.

“Essential services” shall consist of everything listed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security in its Guidance on the Essential Critical Infrastructure Workforce, Version 2.0, plus religious services conducted in churches, congregations, and houses of worship.<sup>17</sup>

In conjunction with the governor’s executive order, the Attorney General of Texas issued a separate document: Guidance for Houses of Worship During the COVID-19 Crisis. Attorney General Ken Paxton emphasized that “the government must give special consideration to houses of worship when issuing orders related to the COVID-19 crisis.”<sup>18</sup>

Some houses of worship must avoid large gatherings. Texas is a big state and the transmission rate of COVID-19 varies in different communities. Given this, houses of worship should work with counties and municipalities to evaluate the rate of local community spread and determine the appropriate level of mitigation strategies to implement. For example, more detailed guidance from the CDC currently recommends that if a community is experiencing substantial community spread of COVID-19, then the houses of worship in that community should cancel all in-person gatherings of any size. But if a community is experiencing moderate to substantial spread, then the CDC recommends a reduction of activities in coordination with local health officials, possible smaller gatherings incorporating social-distancing measures, cancelation of activities with 10 or more people when high-risk populations attend in person (including those over

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<sup>17</sup> Texas Governor, “Texas Executive Order GA 14: Relating to Statewide Continuity of Essential Services and Activities During the COVID-19 Disaster” (March 31, 2020), 2. [https://gov.texas.gov/uploads/files/press/EO-GA-14\\_Statewide\\_Essential\\_Service\\_and\\_Activity\\_COVID-19\\_IMAGE\\_03-31-2020.pdf](https://gov.texas.gov/uploads/files/press/EO-GA-14_Statewide_Essential_Service_and_Activity_COVID-19_IMAGE_03-31-2020.pdf). Accessed February 20, 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Ken Paxton, “Guidance for Houses of Worship During the COVID-19 Crisis,” 1. <https://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/sites/default/files/images/admin/2020/Press/AG%20Guidance%20for%20Houses%20of%20Worship%20During%20the%20COVID-19%20Crisis.pdf>. Accessed February 20, 2023.

65 and those with underlying medical conditions), and use of creative means to deliver other faith-based services. For more information, houses of worship should consult CDC guidance.<sup>19</sup>

The Attorney General maintained this conviction and paragraph in every version of the guidance for houses of worship that was issued concerning the pandemic.

These restrictions do not violate the religious liberty of houses of worship. Under the extraordinary circumstances in which we temporarily live, these restrictions do not violate the religious liberty of houses of worship because the government has a compelling interest for implementing the rules (stopping contagion) and the rules are the least restrictive means of burdening religious practice (they allow houses of worship to stay open for ministry, but suggest ways that help stop the spread of COVID-19).<sup>20</sup>

**April 3, 2020.** President Trump announced the recommendation of the CDC for people to wear face coverings in public spaces, especially in places where there is widespread community transmission. He emphasized that wearing these coverings is voluntary and that he will not take this measure. The debate regarding the effectiveness of wearing masks would eventually spill over into frustration in American life. “U.S. health authorities had discouraged healthy Americans from wearing facial coverings for weeks, saying they were likely to do more harm than good in the fight against the coronavirus—but now, as researchers have learned more about how the highly contagious virus spreads, officials have changed their recommendations.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Paxton, 2. As it relates to the guidance of the CDC, this document included several online resources, some of which are no longer active. “Interim Guidance for Administrators and Leaders of Community- and Faith-Based Organizations to Plan, Prepare, and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) (Mar. 23, 2020). formerly was at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/guidance-communityfaith-organizations.html> has been moved to <https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/86214>. Accessed March 21, 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Paxton, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Colin Dwyer and Allison Aubrey, “CDC Now Recommends Americans Consider Wearing Cloth Face Coverings in Public,” *NPR* (April 3, 2020). [www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/03/826219824/president-trump-says-cdc-now-recommends-americans-wear-cloth-masks-in-public](https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/03/826219824/president-trump-says-cdc-now-recommends-americans-wear-cloth-masks-in-public). Accessed on March 21, 2023.



**April 3-8, 2020.** The local leaders of Dallas and Tarrant Counties went further than recommending that houses of worship look to the CDC guidelines. In light of the spread of COVID in these two counties, the county judges on the commissioners courts of each county released statements banning religious and worship gatherings, essentially taking that decision out of the hands of the various communities of faith in the counties.

Tarrant County Judge Glen Whitley released a video announcement that began with the words, “COVID-19 Church Services STAY HOME,” on the bottom of the screen in front of a bold red background. Later in the video Whitley plainly stated, “In person services are prohibited,” while the words popped onto the screen with the same red background, “PROHIBITED! No in person church services.”<sup>22</sup> Whitley’s video, however, contradicted the explicit language of the official executive order released on April 3. It stated:

Worship Services. Religious services conducted in churches, congregations, and houses of worship are permitted if they cannot be conducted from home or through remote services, so long as Social Distancing is maintained, and existing guidelines set forth by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are followed. Religious services held outdoors whereby individuals remain in their vehicles are strongly encouraged.

Order GA-14 orders that religious services "should be conducted consistent with the Guidelines from the President and the CDC ... "<sup>23</sup>

Whitley’s original video announcement was quickly removed and replaced by an edited video that removed the term “prohibited” and he simply stated, “no big gatherings” with the following explanation below the YouTube video: “Because of the substantial community spread

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<sup>22</sup> Bud Kennedy, “Is Church Closed or Not? At First, You Couldn’t Tell from Tarrant County’s Weak Order,” *Star Telegram* (updated April 8, 2020). [www.star-telegram.com/news/politics-government/article241852246.html](http://www.star-telegram.com/news/politics-government/article241852246.html). Accessed on March 21, 2023. The video announcement is embedded into this report by the *Star Telegram*.

<sup>23</sup> Tarrant County Judge B. Glen Whitley, “Executive Order of County Judge B. Glen Whitley,” modified by the County Judge on April 3, 2020, 5.

of the COVID-19 virus and the religious holidays upon us, Judge Whitley encourages you to avoid in-person worship services through April 30<sup>th</sup>.”<sup>24</sup>

County Judge Clay Jenkins of Dallas County, on the other hand, amended his shelter-in-place order on April 6, 2020, and maintained strict limitations on houses of worship. “Religious and worship services may only be provided by audio, video, and teleconference.”<sup>25</sup>

Likewise, Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price had released statements that banned all in-person faith-based gatherings.

According to CDC guidelines, Fort Worth is now considered to have substantial community spread of the virus. Per the CDC, when there is substantial community transmission, all community and faith-based gatherings of any size must be canceled or postponed. Worship services can only be offered online or through drive-in services, where attendees stay in their respective vehicles and are parked at least six feet apart.<sup>26</sup>

These seemingly contradictory declarations and the ongoing conflict between the authorities to address the pandemic disaster at the local, state and national levels only added to the frustration, stress and tensions of going through the pandemic disaster. Undoubtedly, the uncertainty of knowing how long it would take for the spread of COVID-19 to be brought under control so that businesses, schools, and houses of worship could resume in-person gatherings added another level of frustration and anxiety.

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<sup>24</sup> Tarrant County Judge B. Glen Whitley, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EhJzjHECcfE>. The original video can be seen at [www.star-telegram.com/news/politics-government/article241852246.html](http://www.star-telegram.com/news/politics-government/article241852246.html), accessed on March 21, 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Dallas County Judge, “Amended Order of County Judge Clay Jenkins, Safer at Home Order” (April 6, 2020), 7.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Montoya, “Did Fort Worth’s City Council Defy Abbott by Banning In-Person Worship?” *Texas Scorecard*. [texasscorecard.com/local/did-fort-worths-city-council-defy-abbott-by-banning-in-person-worship](http://texasscorecard.com/local/did-fort-worths-city-council-defy-abbott-by-banning-in-person-worship). Accessed on March 21, 2023.

What appeared to be lost on many people is that the Governor's Executive Order GA 14 clearly stipulated that houses of worship follow the recommendations of the CDC related to COVID conditions in a local community. Likewise, the Guidance for Houses of Worship During the COVID-19 Crisis issued by Attorney General Ken Paxton clearly stipulated that "houses of worship should work with counties and municipalities to evaluate the rate of local community spread and determine the appropriate level of mitigation strategies to implement," and then went on to explain that "guidance from the CDC currently recommends that *if a community is experiencing substantial community spread of COVID-19, then the houses of worship in that community should cancel all in-person gatherings of any size.*"<sup>27</sup>

Both Dallas and Tarrant Counties were at elevated levels of spread at the time. The leaders of these counties and cities were following the guidance by the leadership at the state level to the letter. Nevertheless, battles over who has authority to make decisions about what is and is not allowed, prohibited, and restricted continued to play out in the coming months as the Texas Attorney General attempted to bring local leaders into compliance with further declarations by the governor.<sup>28</sup>

**April 17, 2020.** All school campus closures in Texas were officially extended through the end of the 2019-20 school year by order of the governor.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Texas Attorney General, "Guidance for Houses of Worship During the COVID-19 Crisis," 2. <https://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/sites/default/files/images/admin/2020/Press/AG%20Guidance%20for%20Houses%20of%20Worship%20During%20the%20COVID-19%20Crisis.pdf>. Accessed February 20, 2023.

<sup>28</sup> See Chris Blake, "Paxton Issues Letter Expressing 'Concerns' About Dallas County Orders," *NBC-DFW* (May 12, 2020). [www.nbcdfw.com/news/coronavirus/paxton-issues-letter-expressing-concerns-about-dallas-county-orders/2368282](http://www.nbcdfw.com/news/coronavirus/paxton-issues-letter-expressing-concerns-about-dallas-county-orders/2368282), accessed March 2, 2023.

<sup>29</sup> Star Telegram Staff, "Coronavirus live updates April 17," *Star Telegram* (April 17, 2020). <https://www.star-telegram.com/news/coronavirus/article242077666.html>. Accessed on March 21, 2023.

**April 24, 2020.** Retail stores in Texas were allowed to open for to-go service.

**April 28, 2020.** The United States passes one million confirmed cases of the virus, according to Johns Hopkins.

**May 1, 2020.** Restaurants and stores in Texas were allowed to reopen at 25% capacity.

**May 8, 2020.** Hair and nail salons were allowed to reopen in Texas.

**May 18, 2020.** Governor Abbott allowed gyms to reopen with strict guidelines.

**May 30, 2020.** In a 5-4 decision the Supreme Court upheld a California ruling that allowed the government to place COVID-19 restrictions on houses of worship so long as they do not violate the free exercise clause of the first amendment.

**May 22, 2020.** Governor Abbott allowed bars and entertainment venues to reopen at 25% capacity and restaurants moved to 50% capacity.

**May 29, 2020.** Water parks in Texas were allowed to reopen at 25% capacity.

**May 31, 2020.** Governor Abbott allowed professional and youth sporting events to resume, as well as day camps and extended overnight camps. Standard health protocols were issued for all these activities.

**June 1, 2020.** Texas schools were allowed to have summer classes on campus.

**June 3, 2020.** Bars and stores were moved to 50% capacity in Texas.

**June 12, 2020.** Restaurants were moved to 75% capacity in Texas.

**June 26, 2020.** Bars are ordered to close again statewide, and masks are required again in Tarrant County after Gov. Abbott indicated he will allow mandates under certain circumstances.

**June 29, 2020.** Restaurants in Texas were moved back down to 50% capacity.

**July 2, 2020.** Governor Abbott reversed earlier guidance and required the wearing of a mask in public spaces in any county with 20 or more positive COVID-19 cases, with few exceptions.

**July 21, 2020.** In-person learning in public schools and non-religious private schools was delayed until September 28, in Tarrant County. Online classes only.

**July 28, 2020.** Attorney General Ken Paxton limited the authority of local health officials to cancel in-person school for the sole purpose of preventing surges in COVID.

**September 21, 2020.** The United States officially passed over 200,000 COVID related deaths.

**February 5, 2021.** The United States Supreme Court ruled that California could not ban indoor worship, but that officials could limit gatherings to 25% building capacity and prohibit singing.

**December 20, 2021.** During the final stop of “The History Tour,” a live interview show former President Trump did with former Fox News host Bill O'Reilly, Trump made a few statements about the COVID vaccines to the crowd gathered at the American Airlines Center in Dallas, Texas. He initially drew cheers from the crowd when he said, “If you don't want to take it, you shouldn't be forced to take it. No mandates.” But then part of the same crowd booed Trump when he indicated that he had received the COVID-19 vaccine booster shot.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Jill Colvin, “Trump Booed by Dallas Crowd After Saying He's Had the COVID-19 Booster,” *NBC/DFW* (December 20, 2021). <https://www.nbcdfw.com/news/local/trump-booed-by-dallas-crowd-after-saying-hes-had-the-covid-19-booster/2842883/>. Accessed on April 11, 2023.

## **The Pandemic's Impact on Schools, Children and Families**

The public schools of Tarrant County adjusted to online learning. Just like churches and houses of worship, there was a huge learning curve for the teachers and a rush for the schools to get their equipment up to speed and to ensure all their students had access to the technology they needed to go entirely online. This change had a rippling effect across so many facets of the American culture. As Jessica A. Hoffman and Edward A. Miller pointed out, “Prolonged school closures are one of the most disruptive forces in the COVID-19 era. School closures have up-ended life for children and families, and they left educators forced to determine quickly how to remotely educate students in an equitable manner.”<sup>31</sup>

During this period of school closure, children and adults throughout the United States are experiencing prolonged and collective stress related to myriad societal changes and family events. Salient stressors include the death and illness of family members; social distancing from friends, extended family, teachers, and colleagues; exposure to frightening news information; parental job stress and job loss; and parents being forced into the role of educators while either working from home or providing essential services in the community. Students’ health and mental health needs are going to be even more acute in the wake of the pandemic given the social, emotional, and economic stresses that are proceeding concomitantly and are likely to persist for some period of time once the crisis has been resolved.<sup>32</sup>

This assessment was reinforced by the research of Claudia Andrade, Martie Gillen, José Alberto Molina, and Melissa J. Wilmarth.

Although the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on work, family, and its intersections are yet to be fully understood, families around the world are struggling to keep up with the changing demands and constraints of the pandemic. Alternative employment options and work arrangements including the shift to working from home, work overloads, and technological challenges contribute to family tensions. Families are on the front line of finding ways to adjust to the so-called “new normal.” School and day-care closures,

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<sup>31</sup> Jessica Hoffman and Edward Miller, “Addressing the Consequences of School Closure Due to COVID-19 on Children's Physical and Mental Well-Being,” *World Medical & Health Policy* 12.3 (2020): 301. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wmh3.365>.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

homeschooling, inadequacies in the availability of technology, unequal divisions of household labor, and increased strain, especially for women, loss of contact with non-residential family members, death of family members, and other health concerns are among the most mentioned stressful situations that families are navigating.

Within families, the combination of work and family roles and the increase in time that families spent together meant that they experienced a combination of positive and negative experiences. Overall, the experience of uncertainty and fear in response to the pandemic itself is portrayed as a stressful situation in the face of the major disruptions in family and working lives, with impacts on the emotional and physical well-being of adults and children alike. It is no surprise that families with children report high rates of parental stress, parenting-related exhaustion and higher than normal levels of depression and anxiety among parents and children. Government actions to contain the spread of the virus, via different strategies and resources, have tried to support both the changing employment scenarios and family economic volatility. Yet for some families, contending with unemployment, reduced income, and short-time work, add a social and economic crisis on top of the health crisis, deepening inequalities.

Since the start of the pandemic, families from lower-SES [socioeconomic status] background, families from ethnic minority and vulnerable groups, and women have experienced heightened effects. Many single parents (and those from single-income families) had to maintain the work-family balance with few supports. Some researchers caution that the long-term effects of the pandemic may further widen existing inequalities in income and poverty, education and skills, and intergenerational inequalities, particularly children (including vulnerable children), families with children and young people.<sup>33</sup>

A joint report issued by the CDC, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), The World Bank, and the World Health Organization highlighted an overlooked problem for children during the pandemic.

Today, the world is faced with another new and devastating pandemic that has left vast numbers of bereaved children in its wake, at an unprecedented speed. The COVID-19 pandemic had, by the end of April 2021, left over 1.5 million children experiencing the death of a parent or a grandparent caregiver who lived in their homes and helped care for them.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Claudia Andrade, Martie Gillen, José Molina, Melissa Wilmarth, “The Social and Economic Impact of Covid-19 on Family Functioning and Well-Being: Where do we go from here?” *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 43.2 (May 2022): 207. doi.org/10.1007/s10834-022-09848-x. Accessed March 21, 2023.

<sup>34</sup> Susan Hillis, Juliette Unwin, Lucie Cluver, Lorraine Sherr, Philip Goldman, and et al, “Children: The Hidden Pandemic 2021: A Joint Report Of COVID-19 Associated Orphanhood and a Strategy for Action, 2021.”

The pandemic has disrupted the lives of children in every possible way; and it will undoubtedly have a lasting impact especially on the children.

### **The Pandemic's Impact on the Elderly**

There was also a high concern for the elderly population. Medical doctors Ipsit V. Vahia, Dilip V. Jeste, and Charles F. Reynolds III explored and shared their findings about the impact of COVID-19 on the elderly.

As the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) began to spread in the US in early 2020, older adults experienced disproportionately greater adverse effects from the pandemic including more severe complications, higher mortality, concerns about disruptions to their daily routines and access to care, difficulty in adapting to technologies like telemedicine, and concerns that isolation would exacerbate existing mental health conditions. Older adults tend to have lower stress reactivity, and in general, better emotional regulation and well-being than younger adults, but given the scale and magnitude of the pandemic, there was concern about a mental health crisis among older adults. The concern pertained to older adults both at home and in residential care facilities, where contact with friends, family, and caregivers became limited. The early data suggest a much more nuanced picture. This viewpoint summarizes evidence suggesting that, counter to expectation, older adults as a group may be more resilient to the anxiety, depression, and stress-related mental health disorders characteristic of younger populations during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Approximately 8 months into the pandemic, multiple studies have indicated that older adults may be less negatively affected by mental health outcomes than other age groups. In August 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published a survey, conducted June 24-30, 2020, of 5412 community-dwelling adults across the US, noting that the 933 participants aged 65 years or older reported significantly lower percentages of anxiety disorder (6.2%), depressive disorder (5.8%), or trauma- or stress-related disorder (TSRD) (9.2%) than participants in younger age groups. According to the report, of the 731 participants aged 18 through 24 years, 49.1% reported anxiety disorder; 52.3%, depressive disorder; and 46%, TSRD. Of the 1911 participants aged 25 through 44 years, 35.3% reported anxiety disorder; 32.5%, depressive disorder; and 36% for TSRD. Of the 895 participants aged 45 through 64 years, 16.1% reported anxiety disorder; 14.4%, depressive disorder; and 17.2%, TSRD. Older adults, compared with

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<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/community/orphanhood-report.pdf>. Accessed March 21, 2023.



other age groups, also reported lower rates of new or increased substance use and suicidal ideation in the preceding 30 days, with rates of 3% and 2%, respectively.<sup>35</sup>

These initial findings are consistent with what our congregation observed. The consistent message from the shepherds throughout this time was to stay connected with the church community through direct interaction with other members whether by phone, video calls, texting, or in-person visits that maintain safe distancing and other recommended safety measures.

As the pandemic level remained high in our community and the corresponding COVID protocols dragged on into the summer months, on July 26, 2020, Woodland West implemented what we called Project Connect. This project was a challenge to the church to take everything we were already doing to the next level. We asked everyone to make a minimum of three phone calls every week. Detailed instructions were given for those that needed some coaching on how to do something like this. Our senior saints were among those most excited to participate in Project Connect, as many of them were already doing this with their friends and family.

### **Additional Stressors During the Pandemic**

One of the first and immediate stressors of the pandemic was the loss of work and income related to those who were furloughed or let go from their job because of the shutdown. But even those who were fortunate enough to transition to remote work were undergoing stressors from this unplanned change without any training or preparation. “This situation created both opportunities and additional sources of potential stress and conflict for employees already in the

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<sup>35</sup> Ipsit Vahia, Dilip V. Jeste, and Charles F. Reynolds III. “Older Adults and the Mental Health Effects of COVID-19,” *The Journal of the American Medical Association* 324.22 (December 8, 2020): 2253. doi:10.1001/jama.2020.21753. Accessed March 21, 2023.

midst of concerns about a public health crisis.”<sup>36</sup> A simple survey in June 2020 asked over 2000 respondents, “How has work from home affected your stress level?” 51.4 percent of participants that worked from home during the coronavirus pandemic said that the experience was leaving them more stressed, while 27 percent said that it was having no impact on their stress levels.<sup>37</sup> There are so many factors that could impact these responses: previous remote working experience, position within an organization, home environment, age of children and any need for assisting or tutoring students who were learning remotely, the health of relationships in the household, faith and spiritual practices, physical exercise, income, and so on. Even so, this initial peek into this abrupt transition indicated it resulted in additional stress for at least half of those who were asked.

One of the biggest challenges COVID-19 brought into our lives was information overload. It was a new virus. Little was known about it. It was creating new problems. Governments and health agencies were scrambling to get urgent and relevant data and information to the public.

Early in the process of the pandemic, there were voices pointing to the growing problem of misinformation and disinformation related to all things COVID-19. For example, An Nguyen of Bournemouth University, UK, and Daniel Catalan-Matamoros of University Carlos III of

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<sup>36</sup> Sherrill Hayes, Jennifer Priestley, Brian Moore, and Herman Ray, “Perceived Stress, Work-Related Burnout, and Working from Home Before and During COVID-19: An Examination of Workers in the United States,” *SAGE Open* 11.4 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211058193>.

<sup>37</sup> “Share of employees that feel more stressed working from home during the coronavirus outbreak in the United States as of June 2020,” *Statista* (Sep 30, 2022). <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1140789/working-from-home-impact-stress-us/>.

Madrid, Spain, attempted to make the case that digital media, in particular, was being widely used in a manner that was detrimental. They contended,

Digital media, while opening a vast array of avenues for lay people to effectively engage with news, information and debates about important science and health issues, have become a fertile land for various stakeholders to spread misinformation and disinformation, stimulate uncivil discussions and engender ill-informed, dangerous public decisions. Recent developments of the Covid-19 infodemic might just be the tipping point of a process that has been long simmering in controversial areas of health and science.<sup>38</sup>

Among the examples of mis/disinformation that almost immediately sprang up when the virus so quickly spread around the world, they offered these ideas that were spreading right along with the virus. “The virus is a secret attempt by the global elite to reduce overpopulation. The virus is a bioweapon by the Chinese state to control the world. The virus is a plan by greedy ‘big pharma’ firms to make money from vaccines.”<sup>39</sup>

This problem was not a uniquely American phenomenon. The entire June 2020 issue of *Media and Communication* was devoted to exploring this problem. The subtitle of this publication was *Health and Science Controversies in the Digital World: News, Mis/Disinformation and Public Engagement* and it explored this problem in places like Germany, Italy, Spain, Denmark, Vietnam and Japan, and social media platforms including YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, and beyond.

Sharon Dunwoody’s early assessment of the problem is spot on: “[H]ow can we extract reliable information when we encounter a novel threat and when our information environment is

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<sup>38</sup> An Nguyen, Daniel Catalan-Matamoros, “Digital Mis/Disinformation and Public Engagement with Health and Science Controversies: Fresh Perspectives from Covid-19,” *Media and Communication: Open Access Journal* 8.2 (2020): 323. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v8i2.3352>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 324.

awash in contradictory information? That, in a nutshell, is the situation we face with the Covid-19 pandemic.”<sup>40</sup> She goes on to explore several tendencies that have played into the pandemic experience as it relates to where we get our information and what we believe.

First, she cites Kim Witte’s Extended Parallel Process Model which “predicts that fear combined with a sense of helplessness can lead a person to try to bury a problem by ignoring it. In such situations, individuals may avoid information altogether and engage in ‘business as usual.’”<sup>41</sup> The coining of the term “scamdemic” in reference to COVID-19 is ample evidence of this reality.

The second driver Dunwoody mentions is “our tendency to perceive ourselves as more immune to a risk than are others. Multiple studies over the years have found that we tend to downplay our likelihood of harm from risks of all kinds. When asked, we report that ‘others’ are far more likely to be harmed than are we.” This phenomenon is known as the “optimism bias.” She goes on to explain that “this sense of personal invulnerability can lead a person to readily ingest even conflicting information about a risk but then to set aside the information because it is ‘not about me.’”<sup>42</sup>

Finally, Dunwoody explains why so many of us believe we are deeply informed on all matters related to COVID-19 yet hold such widely diverging conclusions.

A third important driver is to limit one’s exposure to conflicting information by employing that channel heuristic, defaulting to the information channels we deem credible. That means that individuals, although they may access a similar volume of messages about the pandemic, are not encountering the same messages. Beliefs about what is true begin to vary in dysfunctional ways at an aggregate level, leading to a

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<sup>40</sup> Sharon Dunwoody, “Science Journalism and Pandemic Uncertainty,” *Media and Communication: Open Access Journal* 8.2 (2020): 472. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v8i2.3224>.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

challenging situation: Individuals may report relatively high levels of Covid-19 knowledge but may, in fact, ‘know’ wildly dissimilar things.

Intensifying this channel heuristic is the early politicization of the Covid-19 pandemic itself. Nisbet and colleagues have tracked this process in other science issues and found that information about a science issue is usually driven largely by the scientific community in initial stages but then is gradually dominated by political sources (Nisbet & Fahy, 2015). Over time—think climate change, evolution, vaccines and autism—the issue becomes firmly embedded in ideological discourse, encouraging use of information channels that help support those ideological viewpoints. While issue politicization in science is, unfortunately, not unusual, the speed with which the coronavirus pandemic became politicized has been breathtaking. Political figures and ideological groups began building partisan narratives about the risk immediately, competing directly with science narratives that sought to focus on evidence.<sup>43</sup>

All three of these drivers played out in America as it relates to the wearing of masks.

People preferred not to wear a mask because they did not feel at risk for serious consequences to their health if they contracted COVID-19. Some people claimed that scientific research has proven that wearing masks is highly effective at slowing community spread of COVID-19 while other people claimed that scientific research has proven that wearing a mask is entirely ineffective at preventing the spread of COVID-19. And the wearing of masks in public space became a highly politicized and polarizing matter. The decision to wear a mask or not wear a mask became a complicated matter. Is the decision based on doing your part to slow the community spread of COVID-19 or is the decision based on the mask being perceived as an identifying marker of your political convictions?

A fear and lack of trust for both government and pharmaceuticals caused many people to opt not to receive a vaccination for COVID-19. At the very same time this researcher heard several stories about people whose initial resistance to vaccination was overcome by the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 473.

requirement for a vaccine shot to go on a trip with friends. It was by choice. It was not mandated. But, without the vaccination, they would have missed out on the trip with friends and family. So, motivation based on an incentive—not medicine or science—became the critical driver in changing their mind.

As the 2019-20 school season was winding down, conversations about returning to in-person school in the fall were immediately contentious.<sup>44</sup> Teacher unions threatened to go on strike, and several did. And once schools returned to in-person learning, the tensions surrounding education in America only escalated. “For many parents and teachers, the pandemic” became “a slog of anxiety over the risk of infection, child care crises, the tedium of school-through-a-screen and, most of all, chronic instability.”<sup>45</sup> This problem lingered into 2022 as “[m]ore than one million of the country’s 50 million public school students were affected by districtwide shutdowns in the first week of January, many of which were announced abruptly and triggered a wave of frustration among parents.”<sup>46</sup>

But the tension was not limited to teachers and the classrooms. It spilled out into school board meetings too. “Local school officials across the United States [were] being inundated with threats of violence and other hostile messages from anonymous harassers nationwide, fueled by anger over culture-war issues. Reuters found 220 examples of such intimidation in a sampling of

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<sup>44</sup> Juan Perez Jr., “Weingarten: Teacher Strikes Possible in Arizona, Florida, Texas,” *Politico* (July 29, 2020). <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/29/teacher-strike-weingarten-coronavirus-387397>. Accessed April 16, 2023.

<sup>45</sup> Dana Goldstein and Noam Scheiber, “As More Teachers’ Unions Push for Remote Schooling, Parents Worry. So Do Democrats,” *New York Times* (January 8, 2022). <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/08/us/teachers-unions-covid-schools.html>. Accessed February 21, 2023.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

districts.”<sup>47</sup> But these conflicts were not limited to COVID protocols, like whether students should be required to wear masks. The frustrated soul of America found new and fertile soil in the American education systems. “School board members across the United States. . . endured a rash of terroristic threats and hostile messages ignited by roiling controversies over policies on curtailing the coronavirus, bathroom access for transgender students and the teaching of America’s racial history.”<sup>48</sup>

Texas and the Metroplex were not immune to any of these problems and controversies.

As Brian Lopez reported about this tension in Fort Worth at the end of 2021:

Across the nation, as the coronavirus' delta variant surge dissipated, the louder discussions over how racism is taught or even brought up in class have dominated school board meetings. There are complaints about how any discussion of racism is evidence of how critical race theory is being forced upon students.

Critical race theory, which holds that racism is embedded in legal systems and other policies, is a university-level subject and not one that has been introduced in any secondary school in Texas. But CRT has become shorthand for some members of the public who label any discussion of race as “critical race theory.”<sup>49</sup>

This tension about conversations regarding race was exacerbated by several incidents of police violence against people of color and the protests that followed during the height of the pandemic experience. A video of the shooting of Ahmaud Arbery was released on May 5, 2020. A few weeks later on May 27, there were protests across the nation in light of the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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<sup>47</sup> Gabriella Borter, Joseph Ax and Joseph Tanfani, “School Boards Get Death Threats Amid Rage Over Race, Gender, Mask Policies,” *Reuters* (February 15, 2022). <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-education-threats/>.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Brian Lopez, “Death Threats and Doxxing: The Outcomes of Mask Mandate and Critical Race Theory Fights at a Texas School Board,” *Texas Tribune* (Dec. 15, 2021). <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/12/15/texas-school-boards-political-fights/>.

In addition to the ongoing concerns about COVID-19, the economy and how quickly to attempt to open businesses and return to life as usual, record-breaking wildfires were raging out of control in Oregon, California, and Colorado.

As if the nation, local communities, and churches needed anything more to further divide and polarize us, 2020 was an election year. The campaign season poured gasoline on and fanned the flames of everything that was already volatile in American life. The post-election claims of election fraud and the attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6 only made matters worse.

While the nation was still reeling from the latest political fallout from the attack on our nation's Capitol Building on February 13, 2021, Texas began to be assaulted with the epic Winter Storm Uri that resulted in 80 to 130 billion dollars of damage and over 200 deaths as a result of the collapse of the state's electric grid system and the widespread power outages that resulted.<sup>50</sup> Several families in the congregation lost power and had water pipes freeze and burst, or had neighbors and friends who lived through such an experience. Again, members reached out to help one another and their neighbors to provide warm space while waiting for power to be restored.

At the end of March of 2021, a Gallup Poll reported what many Christians had been fearing: church membership in the United States had fallen below the majority of citizens for the first time in history. It was reported that in 2020 only 47% of Americans claimed to belong to a church, synagogue, or mosque, which was down more than 20% since the turn of the century. As opposed to anything related to the pandemic, the report concluded that the "decline in church

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<sup>50</sup> Jess Donald, "Winter Storm Uri 2021: The Economic Impact of the Storm," *Fiscal Notes: A Review of The Texas Economy from The Office of Glenn Hegar, Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts* (October 2021): 3.



membership is primarily a function of the increasing number of Americans who express no religious preference.” In addition to this decrease in church membership—even among those who claim a religious faith—the average number of these people who belong as members of a church, synagogue or mosque was down from 73% between 1998 and 2000, to 60% over the course of 2018 to 2020. In attempting to discern the implications of this trend Jones concluded, “While it is possible that part of the decline seen in 2020 was temporary and related to the coronavirus pandemic, continued decline in future decades seems inevitable, given the much lower levels of religiosity and church membership among younger versus older generations of adults.”<sup>51</sup>

Just as we were beginning to promote the congregational research study project event we called a Day of Discovery, Hope and Renewal, Russian forces were amassing just across the border from Ukraine. Woodland West has a long history with the West Bank Church in Mariupol and the Ukrainian Bible Institute in Kyiv. Our church leaders were working with their church leaders should the worst come to pass. Russian President Vladimir Putin maintained that they were only conducting military training exercises. Yet on February 24, 2022, the invasion began; the resulting war continues to the present day.

In summary, the pandemic experience touched on just about every aspect of our lives—work, commerce, entertainment, dining, athletics, shopping (including shortages of food, toilet paper, and hand sanitizer), exercise, travel, politics, education, medicine, volunteerism, and even something as basic and simple as getting a haircut. On top of all these things the pandemic

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<sup>51</sup> Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time,” *Gallup* (March 29, 2021). <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>. Accessed March 21, 2023.

experience resulted in the loss of social interaction with our social support systems, family and friends, as well as a total disruption of traditional holiday gatherings, funerals, family reunions, and a host of other life events that have shaped and sustained us throughout our lives. This, of course, included the loss of our regular frequent interactions with the church.

### **The Specific COVID-19 Context of Woodland West**

In light of the health emergency and disaster declarations issued on March 13, 2020 at the national, state and local levels, coupled with the growing concerns of the spread of COVID-19 in the Metroplex, on Saturday, March 14, 2020, an email communication went out to the members of Woodland West to communicate that all activities besides Sunday morning worship were immediately suspended until further notice. Explicit instructions were given for those who would opt to attend worship on Sunday, March 15, to refrain from hugs and shaking hands. A description of what to expect in terms of distributing self-containing all-in-one cup and bread supplies for the Lord's Supper was also included in this congregational email.

Again, March 15 had been declared a National Day of Prayer by President Trump. The above-mentioned email message sent to the members of Woodland West encouraged everyone to pray in the spirit of Philippians 4:6-7. Instead of being anxious, we urged everyone to pray with thanksgiving in the hope that the peace of God will guard our hearts and minds in Christ as we trust him to bring us through whatever the future may hold.

Everyone was encouraged to make their own decision about whether or not they would attend on the basis of what they believed was in their best interests, both for their personal health and the safety of their family. There would be no judgment on their decision should they choose

to stay home. Those who chose not to attend were asked to reach out to a shepherd or minister to let the leadership team know they were well, but would not be present.

Our attendance for the day was 109, less than half of what our average attendance had been so far for the year. We sent the recording of the worship assembly to the entire church via email, so that everyone could hear the encouragement and instructions that the shepherds gave to the church for what to expect, what to do and how to pray in the coming days.

Sunday, March 15, was our last in-person worship event for twelve long weeks—that felt even longer. The next day President Donald Trump issued national guidelines limiting gatherings to 10 people or less.

To make sure that nobody was sick at home and needing assistance without any awareness by the leadership team of the church, the daily email messages to the church began to include the following message.

The ministers and shepherds would like to know if you are sick and at home. You can do this in any one of the following ways. Send an email to [shepherds@wwcoc.org](mailto:shepherds@wwcoc.org). Call or text the shepherd or minister of your choice to let one of them know. Or call the church office at 817-275-2657 ext. 102 and leave a message on Randy's voice mailbox.

Please be praying for our church, our city, our nation, and our world during this difficult time. We are here to help one another and our community as best we can. Please do whatever you can to be a servant of Christ and bless those needing help in any way.

Since we were not meeting for Wednesday night Bible study, an appeal went out to the church via email for everyone to devote time to prayer on that night.

**We will not be meeting for Bible classes Wednesday night, March 18.** Instead, we want to ask everyone to devote some time to pray to our God on behalf of our community, our nation, and our world. We will be joining our Christian friends from all over Arlington and around the world that are devoting themselves to prayer at some point Wednesday night. Many of us will be praying at 7, but pray whenever you can, alone or with your family or a small group of friends. The daily Bible reading below is also about prayer. You might want to read it as a way to begin your time of prayer.

In addition to whatever else you want to pray about tonight, please take some time to pray specifically about each of these important matters.

- *Pray for those who are already being impacted financially by this pandemic.*
- *Pray for those who are most at risk due to their age and health.*
- *Pray for those who have already been infected by the coronavirus.*
- *Pray for first responders.*
- *Pray for the hospitals, clinics, doctors, nurses, and the entire medical and health care community.*
- *Pray for hope to be pervasive and for God's people to be light.*
- *Pray for the families, parents and children as we talk about and live through all of this.*
- *Pray for our schools, universities, administrators, teachers, students, homeschoolers, etc.*
- *Pray for the businesses, companies large and small, as they cope with everything.*
- *Pray for our civic and government leaders, locally, nationally and globally.*
- *Pray for the churches and church leaders around the world.*

A group of preachers and pastors from churches across Arlington had gathered at First Baptist Church in Arlington to put together a short video encouraging our people to pray specifically for all the things in this list. A link to this short video was included in this email message.<sup>52</sup>

Our shepherds and ministers began meeting weekly via Zoom. One of the first things we did was to make sure we continued to take care of the flock entrusted to our care. We walked through the entire list of church members and the shepherds and ministers selected those to whom they made the commitment to call every week as a way to stay in touch with our members

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<sup>52</sup> First Baptist Church Arlington, "Prayer Time 3 Minutes," YouTube video, 3:32, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=CcIX5dVerUI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CcIX5dVerUI).

and ensure that anyone who might have needs were getting the help, assistance or care that they need.

Several of the shepherds' wives took it upon themselves to organize a similar calling tree just for the women. Other leading women of the congregation were asked to join in this effort to make a phone call every week to a short list of other ladies in the church for the purpose of encouragement and prayer to help everyone feel connected and valued.

We immediately began making video recordings of sermons for each Sunday, providing readings for the Lord's Supper, prayer points for prayers at home, and links for hymns to be sung. Within a few weeks we transitioned to making a worship video that was all-inclusive. In addition to the sermon, announcements, communion readings, prayers and worship songs were recorded in advance and put together as one continuous recording.

The response was predictable. There was both an expression of grateful appreciation for these efforts to keep us in the Word, to allow us to continue to share in the Lord's Supper in this isolated manner, and to encourage us to sing and pray to God every Lord's Day; and there was the honest observation that it just was not the same. Everyone was grateful that we were at least doing this, but everyone also longed for the day when we could come back together as the church.

The very first video sermon message to the church on the first day (March 24, 2020) we were unable to meet together, was very direct and to the point: *The Church That Never Closes*. The intention of this message was to remind ourselves that the Lord is always with us and that the church does not have walls, because we are the church in which God lives. We are the church wherever we are, and we serve the Lord by serving one another and our neighbors in whatever ways that we can.

The only way the church can close is if we close our eyes to the obvious needs of the world, and if we close our eyes to the needs of people all around us.

The only way the church can close is if we close our ears to the voices of those who are crying out to us for help.

The only way the church can close is if we close our hearts to the love of God that would move us, stir us, and inspire us to imitate our God by living a life of love and do something for the sake of others.

The only way the church can close is if we close our minds to the things of God, the will of God, and the mind of Christ. . .

We are always open to the will of God.

We are always open to opportunities to go and serve.

We are always open to the call of God on our lives.

We may not be meeting together in this space, but we are open! So, let's be the church that is always open, and the church never closes!<sup>53</sup>

The consistent message to our congregation throughout this season is captured by this email that was sent out on March 19, 2020.

As a reminder, we are all ministers and servants of Christ. We are a royal priesthood that serves God by serving others. We encourage everyone to do their part in calling other members of Woodland West, to help everyone feel connected while we are not able to meet, to help everyone feel valued and loved, and to find out if anyone has a need. If you are able to meet that need, please do that. If the need is beyond your ability, reach out to your Growth Group or others at Woodland West that can partner with you to meet the need. And if the need is bigger than your circle of friends at Woodland West, please contact the shepherds or ministers and let us know.<sup>54</sup>

Included in this same email message to the church was an appeal for us to apply the teaching of Philippians 2:1-11 to this new life situation.

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<sup>53</sup> Randy Todd, "The Church that Never Closes," sermon presented at Woodland West Church of Christ, Arlington, Texas. March 22, 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, "Woodland West Update—Thursday, March 19," email sent to church members, March 19, 2020.

Our call in Christ is to put the interests of others ahead of our own, just as Christ did. We are to think about those who are vulnerable and at risk if they become infected by this virus. We are to think of the people we know and love, and the people we don't know but are called to love, in our every action in life. When we take every appropriate action to protect not just ourselves, but everyone else, to reduce the likelihood that we are spreading this coronavirus, we are acting in love. This is the attitude and mindset of Christ that brought him into a world full of sickness and death. He came into this world to lay down his life for us all, to redeem us, to save us from the power of sin and death, to give us life and hope, and to bring us into the kingdom of light, making us to be a kingdom of priests who faithfully, humbly and courageously serve the living God by compassionately serving others in everything we do. Have the mindset and attitude of Christ. He put your needs before his own and changed the future of the world! We can do the same today, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior!<sup>55</sup>

Nine days later when Tarrant County issued a stay-at-home order on March 24, Woodland West leadership immediately complied with this order. An email was sent out to the church on Wednesday, March 25, to inform everyone that all our church staff would immediately begin working remotely instead of in the offices. Everyone was to continue to contact church staff and shepherds with any needs, just as always.

The persistent appeal from the shepherds to the church throughout this time was to stay connected with the Woodland West church family through direct interaction with other members whether by phone, video calls, texting, or in-person visits that maintained safe distancing and other recommended safety measures.

One of the shepherds and his wife made the commitment to do curbside pickup of communion supplies every Friday at the church building. Members made an appointment to let them know they were coming and how many servings they needed. These were bagged up in advance and ready to be delivered to the car whenever a member drove up.<sup>56</sup> Other members

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<sup>55</sup> Woodland West.

<sup>56</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, "Curbside Communion Supplies Pickup—Friday at WWCC, April 2, 2020," email message sent to church members, April 2, 2020.

offered their services to make store runs to pick up and deliver whatever anyone might need during the pandemic.<sup>57</sup> We offered our toilet paper at the church building to anyone who had been unable to find paper in the stores. All members had to do was text or call Rick Spear to arrange pickup or delivery.<sup>58</sup> Another member of Woodland West offered her services to make masks for anyone who wanted one.<sup>59</sup>

On Sunday, April 4, we began to offer interactive Sunday morning Bible studies online through Facebook and Zoom. We were already sending out a devotional message in our daily emails to the church called Dwelling in the Word. That continued as usual until Wednesday, April 8, 2020. To make things feel a bit more interactive, the preacher started making a video recording of each day's message. The text was also still included for anyone who preferred to read it. The preacher's son quickly took on the task of creating intro and outro music and images for these Dwelling in the Word videos.

For Sunday morning worship we had initially been sending an email message with different links for every part of the worship time: Announcements, songs, the Lord's Supper, and the sermon. Two younger members of our congregation made huge time commitments to start putting all these components together in one continuous video that made the experience much

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<sup>57</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, "Woodland West Update—Thursday, March 26, 2020," email message sent to church members, March 26, 2020.

<sup>58</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, "Woodland West Update—Thursday, April 2, 2020," email message sent to church members, April 2, 2020.

<sup>59</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, "Woodland West Update—Wednesday, April 8, 2020," email message sent to church members, April 8, 2020.



easier for everyone at home. The first such video was sent to the church on Resurrection Sunday, April 12.<sup>60</sup>

It was during this same week that our children's minister began offering a fun interactive time on Zoom every Wednesday Night for all the preschool and elementary children and parents of the church. He called it a Chat-n-Pray session with Mr. Trey. The following week he added a daily live stream at 10 o'clock every morning called Mr. Trey's Pretty Good Bible Show, which was also recorded and posted on YouTube. He also did a weekly 15-minute family Bible study that he sent out every Saturday for families to do whenever they wanted over the weekend.<sup>61</sup> Finally, he offered to chat with any of the kids that just had cabin fever or needed some help with schoolwork.

In our continued effort to try to make the Sunday worship video feel more connected, we asked members to make a short video at their front door to welcome their church family and invite everyone to come in and join them for worship.<sup>62</sup>

On Wednesday, April 29, 2020, we sent a message to the church to let everyone know that we were aiming to begin meeting for in-person worship on Sunday, May 24. This was a video announcement by one of the shepherds along with the manuscript for the video.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, "WWCC Worship & More—April 12, 2020," email message sent to church members, April 12, 2020.

<sup>61</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, WWCOG Update—Thursday, April 23, 2020," email message to church members, April 23, 2020.

<sup>62</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, Woodland West Update—April 24, 2020," email message to church members, April 24, 2020.

<sup>63</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, Woodland West Update—April 29," email message to church members, April 29, 2020.

As part of our preparation for resuming in-person worship gatherings, we sent an online survey to the church asking everyone to please take the time to answer three simple questions.<sup>64</sup>

1. Which best describes your attitude about returning to a church assembly at Woodland West?
  - ☐ I will be there on May 24. Can't wait!
  - ☐ I will be there on May 24, but have concerns and will be very cautious.
  - ☐ I will wait a few more weeks beyond May 24 before returning.
  - ☐ It may be quite a while before I return.
2. What precautions, if any, do you plan to take when you return to a church assembly at Woodland West? (Please select all that apply.)
  - ☐ I will wear a mask.
  - ☐ I will sit and stand at least 6 feet from people at all times.
  - ☐ I will avoid shaking hands.
  - ☐ I will avoid all contact.
  - ☐ None of the above.
3. What is your age and the age of the members of your family who will be with you? (Please check all that apply.)
  - ☐ Less than 13 years old
  - ☐ 13-18 years old
  - ☐ 18-29 years old
  - ☐ 30-49 years old
  - ☐ 50-69 years old
  - ☐ 70+ years old
  - ☐ Prefer not to answer.

We received 91 responses to this survey.

### Question 1

- 41 responded, “I will be there on May 24. Can't wait!”
- 21 responded, “I will be there on May 24, but have concerns and will be very cautious.”
- 25 responded, “I will wait a few more weeks beyond May 24 before returning.”

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<sup>64</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, “Woodland West Sunday Worship & More—May 3,” email message to church members, May 3, 2020.

- 4 responded, “It may be quite a while before I return.”

## Question 2

- 42 responded “I will wear a mask.”
- 66 responded, “I will sit and stand at least 6 feet from people at all times.”
- 78 responded, “I will avoid shaking hands.”
- 46 responded, “I will avoid all contact.”
- 9 responded, “None of the above.” One of these followed clicking on all the other options too. Four of these responses were given by those who indicated they would be waiting beyond May 24. It is unclear whether they chose this because they would not be here on May 24 or because they were indicating that whenever they returned, they would not be exercising any COVID-19 protocols.

As anticipated, the two groups that were most cautious about returning on May 24 and indicated they planned to exercise most, or all, COVID-19 protocols were parents with children and those who were 70+ in age.

The May church newsletter was sent to everyone on May 4 with more of the same language of stay connected to one another, reach out to do something for someone, and spend time with the Lord in prayer and in the Word. For Mother’s Day, in addition to the worship video we put together a video interviewing three of the moms of Woodland West, letting them share stories and life lessons they learned from their moms and give a little encouragement to all the moms out there.<sup>65</sup>

On Sunday, May 17, we sent a four-page document that detailed the plan for coming back together for worship on May 24. This document described what the experience would be

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<sup>65</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, “Woodland West Mother's Day Worship & More—May 10,” email message to church members, May 10, 2020.

like, what would be done to make this as safe as possible, and what was expected of those who come.

On May 19, our shepherds and ministers team met to pray and discuss the latest information regarding the spike in COVID cases and hospitalization occupancy as Texas and the Metroplex had been gradually reopening in the past few weeks. New concerns were also being raised about the risk of singing. After much discussion the decision was made to postpone our first Sunday back together and wait for both more information about the new concerns and for the community level of COVID cases to come back down. The planned May 24 gathering was cancelled.

It was also decided that while waiting for more information about the likelihood of COVID-19 transmission through congregational singing we would take some additional precautions when we first started meeting together again. We would initially eliminate singing in our gatherings and focus on prayer, the Lord's Supper, and a short sermon.

With this newly proposed approach to our initial gatherings together for congregational worship, the shepherds again wanted to hear from the church. A fresh congregational survey was sent out that included the option for members to share whatever thoughts they wanted in addition to answering the questions in the survey.

The video and the accompanying congregational survey were sent out on Wednesday, May 20.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, "Woodland West Update—Wednesday, May 20," email message to church members, May 20, 2020.

On May 29, in order to avoid setting another target date that might get squashed by another spike in COVID cases in our area, it was communicated to the church that the decision of when we might come together for worship was now a week-by-week decision based on the current COVID trends and data. The shepherds and ministers met every Tuesday via Zoom to consider the latest information. Whenever the decision to meet together was made, it would be communicated to the church via email on the very next day.<sup>67</sup>

We also shared the overall results from the latest congregational survey regarding everyone's readiness for coming back together again.

[T]hank you for your responses to the survey over this past weekend. This information is very helpful to us. We are still digesting all of your comments and suggestions. Half of the responses indicated a readiness and a strong desire to meet together as soon as possible, and the other half indicated a strong desire to wait longer. It was essentially 50/50. Half of you were thankful that we delayed and half of you were disappointed. Half of you are urging caution and half of you are urging us to move forward with meeting together as a church. Once we begin meeting, we anticipate that those who are ready will be here, and those who want to wait will worship at home. We want to encourage everyone to please choose for themselves what is right for their individual health concerns for themselves and their family. We will not judge or criticize those who meet as being reckless and taking unnecessary risks and we will not judge or criticize those who choose to stay home as being overly cautious. But when we meet, we will adhere to social distancing and other measures designed to reduce the risks as much as we can, as previously communicated for when we meet together again. America is being polarized over all things COVID-19. We do not want our congregation to be polarized over this. We want to love each other and be considerate of one another's needs and desires in this matter.

We also communicated that one of the sources of our COVID information was a weekly Zoom gathering of the mayor, fire chief, and emergency physician with preachers and pastors in Arlington. As of that day, the Tarrant County Public Health Department continued to list the

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<sup>67</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, "Woodland West Weekend Update—May 29, 2020," email message to church members, May 29, 2020.

Community Spread Level for our area as Substantial and continued to recommend all the precautionary measures that had been given for the past two months.

We again urged everyone to maintain an honorable spirit.

[O]ur nation is being polarized over how to respond to the data, information, projection and risks. Instead of taking a “we are right, and they are wrong” approach, we again encourage everyone to be gracious, considerate and humble in our words and thoughts as we wrestle with our personal feelings about everything going on in our world and the way it is impacting our lives and our congregations.<sup>68</sup>

It was this very same week that George Floyd tragically died with the knee of a Minneapolis police officer pressed down on his throat. The text of an additional sermon of sorts was sent to the church along with that Sunday’s worship video, urging us, as God’s people, to respond to everything that is going on in our world as those who know and follow Jesus. Here is the closing appeal.

Pray to the Lord to open our eyes. Pray to the Lord to show us the way. Pray to the Lord to give us strength and courage to walk in the ways that lead to empathy, remorse, compassion, confession, forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, peace, righteousness, and justice for all. Go about this day and week with grief and hope, empathy and compassion, and humility and courage. Listen carefully before you speak. Consider especially the words of those who are hurting and angry and afraid. Be there for them. And when you speak, speak carefully. Speak words of life and hope, season your words with grace and humility, instead of adding fuel to the fire. Pursue peace. We are not to be overcome by evil. We are called and empowered by God to overcome evil with good. We can do all things through Christ who gives us strength.<sup>69</sup>

We also urged our people to join with all the citizens of Arlington and people throughout our nation for a National Day of Prayer and Remembrance on June 1. The U.S. Conference of Mayors had declared this day with an appeal for everyone to pause to recognize and pray for the

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<sup>68</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, “Woodland West Weekend Update—May 29, 2020,” email message to church members, May 29, 2020.

<sup>69</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, “May 31, Woodland West Sunday Worship Video & More,” email message to church members, May 31, 2020.

more than 100,000 lives that had been lost as a result of COVID-19, and the many families and other survivors who have been impacted by this loss of life.<sup>70</sup>

On Wednesday, June 3, we announced the plan for our first Sunday of worshiping together again on campus on Sunday, June 7. A slightly revised document detailing what to expect and what is expected of everyone who attends was sent to the church via email. Wearing masks was recommended, but not required.<sup>71</sup>

On June 4 we sent a video message done by Mary Jo Cochrum, our licensed professional counselor of ten years, to speak to everything that was going on both from a woman's perspective and as a counselor.

Working with the mayor of Arlington and the city's police department, Pastor Kennedy Jones and the Arlington Ministerial Association planned and organized a peaceful march by the Christian community of Arlington as part of the Equal Protection and Justice Under the Law Summit that took place between city leaders and several members of the ministerial association. The march took place on Sunday, June 7. It began at the Greater Community Missionary Baptist Church and made its way to the Levitt Pavilion across the street from the City Hall of Arlington.<sup>72</sup> In this open air public city space there was a prolonged period of preaching, Christian proclamations of love and justice, prayer, Scripture readings, and the singing of Christian songs of praise before the ceremony concluded with a reading of The Equal Protection

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<sup>70</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, "National Day of Prayer Reminder—Pray at Noon," email message to church members, June 1, 2020.

<sup>71</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, "Woodland West Update—Wednesday, June 3, 2020," email message sent to church members, June 3, 2020.

<sup>72</sup> Susan Shrock, "Creation of Unity Council Latest Step in Arlington's Continued Work to Eliminate Racism, Discrimination" (July 9, 2020).  
[https://www.arlingtontx.gov/news/my\\_arlington\\_tx/news\\_stories/unity\\_in\\_community](https://www.arlingtontx.gov/news/my_arlington_tx/news_stories/unity_in_community).

and Justice Under the Law Proclamation which was then presented to and received by Mayor Jeff Williams. Along with Christians from churches all over the city of Arlington, two of our ministers and several members of Woodland West participated in this peaceful engagement with city officials for a better future for all our citizens.

In light of the events and conversations taking place on the topic of race and justice, we also encouraged our people to participate in a two-night online event called, “One in Christ: Uniting for Racial Justice and Reconciliation.” This event took place on Wednesday and Thursday night, July 15-16, from 6 to 8 p.m. and was hosted by Vanguard Solutions Consulting.

The first night featured three Church of Christ ministers speaking out of the theme: Orlander Thomas of the Southside Church of Christ in Durham, North Carolina, spoke on "The Problem Of Racial Injustice And Disharmony," David Young of the North Boulevard Church of Christ in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, spoke on "The Biblical Mandate For Racial Justice And Oneness," Dr. Tony Roach of the Minda Street Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas, and CEO of God's Love Bank, presented a message titled, "Towards A Christian Solution," and Dr. Ervin Seamster, President of Southwestern Christian College, gave some closing remarks. The second night of the event was styled as a virtual town meeting that engaged a small panel of Church of Christ ministers and leaders on the topic of the theme.<sup>73</sup>

After two weeks of meeting for worship without singing, the news was sent out that we would include singing in our worship gathering on Sunday, June 21, which happened to be Father's Day.

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<sup>73</sup> The recording of the first night of this event can be found on YouTube as “7.15.20 One in Christ Spiritual Empowerment Experience Presented By VSC Online Ministries,” [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gq5ErZu-mis](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gq5ErZu-mis).



**PLEASE READ THIS:** Everyone who sings will need to wear a mask. The shepherds and ministers met with the chief epidemiologist of Tarrant County Public Health Department a few weeks ago. It just so happens that he is also a member of the Church of Christ in Alvarado. He confirmed for us that singing increases the risk of spreading COVID-19 and advised that if we opt to include congregational singing in our worship gatherings that we should require everyone who sings to wear a mask in order to reduce this risk. This echoes the CDC, which strongly encourages the wearing of facemasks for singing. So, wearing a mask will be mandatory for anyone who wants to sing, no matter how softly you may sing. Please bring your mask with you to church this Sunday and be sure to wear it whenever we are singing. There will be masks available, if you do not have one.

Because of the extra challenge of singing while wearing a mask, we plan to sing only two songs this first Sunday and the songs will be spaced out: One song before the sermon and one shortly before we dismiss.<sup>74</sup>

With a rise in COVID cases in Tarrant County, beginning Sunday, June 28, we required everyone attending worship to wear a mask throughout our time together before, during and after worship. Also, in compliance with the new Tarrant County executive order that went into effect on Friday, June 26, we began requiring the wearing of a face mask for anyone to enter the church building and offices during the week. In our communications to the church, we began with the term “required” and then consistently used the term “expected.”

On July 19, our Senior Sunday for our five graduating high school seniors was adjusted. Instead of spreading out the event through the worship time, a congregational fellowship meal, and a final gathering for videos for each graduate, the entire celebration took place during the worship assembly. The celebration meal after worship was limited to their families joined by the families of the shepherds and ministers. The celebration meal has since been opened back up to everyone, but the changes to the format during the worship hour have been maintained.

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<sup>74</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, “Woodland West Update—Wednesday, June 17, 2020,” email message to church members, June 17, 2020.

While various Zoom and Facebook Bible study options on Sunday mornings continued, we added similar Wednesday night options in July of 2020. As the pandemic level remained high in our community and the corresponding COVID-19 protocols for being in public dragged on into the summer months, on July 26, 2020, Woodland West implemented what we called Project Connect. This project challenged the church to take everything we were already doing to keep the church connected and engaged with one another to the next level. We asked everyone to make a minimum of three phone calls every week. Detailed instructions were given for those that needed some coaching on how to do something like this. Those who were motivated to do more were encouraged to do more, but we wanted everyone to at least make the effort to do this minimum of three calls every week.

We made the initial appeal through the sermon of the day, and we sent out the following appeal and instructions to our church via email.

This email is a call to action to every member of Woodland West. We are asking you to make one phone call every day this week to another member of the congregation.

- Ask them how they are doing.
- Ask them if they need anything.
- Ask them how you can pray for them.

If you are able to address a need on your own or can ask a friend or two to assist you in doing this, please do so. If the need is bigger than your resources, pass it along to the shepherds.

Pray for this member and/or his/her family before you end the call.

Please report any needs or prayer concerns that this member wants you to share to the shepherds either by calling one of the shepherds directly or by sending an email to the shepherds at [shepherds@wwcoc.org](mailto:shepherds@wwcoc.org).

Thank you in advance for your efforts in the name of Jesus!<sup>75</sup>

This renewed push for everyone to do something to show their devotion to the fellowship and their love and concern for their fellow members of Woodland West was well received.

August 2 marked the end of the 14-month internships of the two AIM (Adventures in Missions) apprentices at Woodland West, an experience that was radically reshaped by the pandemic experience.

Graduation parties, bridal and baby showers were adjusted to drive-by events where people could swing by, give a gift and congratulations, and pull away for the next person wanting to offer a blessing.

In August of 2020, our youth and other members received training to participate in a virtual GO opportunity to do Let's Start Talking online with children at Camp Bellevue in Ecuador.

During the month of August, we also offered an in-person Bible study at the church building on Sunday mornings. Various other small gatherings at the church building or elsewhere for Bible study with ample space to safely meeting while keeping distance began to resume meeting on different days of the week during this time. Members also met together in their homes, at parks, in their yards or other open spaces for fellowship and encouragement.

Our usual back to school breakfast event for all the teachers and staff at Duff Elementary became a drop off event of goodie bags in the mailboxes of all the teachers that included a

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<sup>75</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, "WWCC Project Staying Connected," email message to church members, July 26, 2020.

Starbucks gift card, an apple stress ball, a star clip, Starburst, and an encouraging card written and designed by Trey Laminack.

In September we did a clothing drive to send clothes to the Siempre Familia congregation in Fort Worth to share with the people living in their community who have been especially hard hit by the shutdowns, work at home, and economic slowdown caused by the pandemic.

This was the month of our annual Mission Sunday on September 27. In addition to the giving for Mission Sunday, funds were also collected for the relief efforts of Hurricane Laura and sent to Churches of Christ Disaster Relief Effort.

On Sunday, September 20, 2020, it was announced to the church that we were considering when we might resume in-person Bible classes for everyone on Sunday mornings in addition to worship. To help with this decision and the planning it would require, everyone was asked to participate in another online survey.

Three possible target dates for resuming in-person Sunday morning Bible studies were provided: October 18, November 15, and January 3. The overwhelming majority response, 50 out of 70 household responses, was for October 18. This date was set.

Details regarding what to expect and what would be expected were sent out to everyone. The same protocols of wearing a mask and maintaining distance would be practiced in the adult and youth classes. The children's classes were more detailed and followed the procedures the children and families were already experiencing and practicing at the Arlington city schools.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, "Woodland West Update," email message to church members, October 18, 2020.

As different Bible classes attracted differing numbers of participants and these numbers fluctuated, we found ourselves playing musical chairs with the room assignments for a few weeks until everything settled into a new consistent pattern. Allowing for class participation in the gymnasium was especially difficult. Both the physical distance and the acoustics of the gym made it very difficult to hear what someone else said, detracting a bit from the experience of being together in the Word.

In November of 2020, as worship attendance continued to increase, we made a contingency plan for once our auditorium ran out of space for everyone to sit at the recommended distance from other households. We set up equipment to live stream the worship assembly in the gym and set up seating in the gym to accommodate overflow.

During the Thanksgiving holiday week of 2020 there was a spike in COVID cases in North Texas that included several families of Woodland West. Some college students brought it home with them and the risk was increased that others might become infected and spread it. The shepherds made the decision to immediately cancel all in-person Bible studies at the church building on Sunday mornings indefinitely. This meant shifting gears back to online Bible studies.

The ministers began putting together a weekly video Bible study titled, Faith, Hope, Love and Life that was an interactive time between the three of them talking through the teachings and stories of Scripture that press us into those themes. The goal of the study was to help us see how our faith, hope, love and life are all connected together. Each session was simply a Zoom recording that was edited and uploaded for release every Sunday morning. Members were asked to send in recordings of themselves and their children doing Bible readings or finishing up statements like, “I can’t wait to see Jesus because. . .” to be added to the recording. The overall

goal was to make this have a Today Show feel that was more engaging than simply having one teacher speaking into a solitary camera.

It was during these months that as information became available for COVID test centers in Arlington, we shared this information with the church via email.

People connected with Woodland West reached out to us with an appeal to send toothbrushes to Honduras after several hurricanes had swept through. One of our members was about to fly there to visit with family there and took them with her.<sup>77</sup>

Throughout the pandemic several other ministries carried on. Meal Train plans continued to be set up for members who had surgeries and other life events that made the delivery of a meal a blessing. The Christian Campus Center (Tri-C) continued to make distributions of food to the students of the University of Texas at Arlington. Members made meals and delivered them, and members continued to purchase the requested food supplies for the Tri-C. Adjustments were also made to the process for distributing food and clothing to those who came seeking assistance through Hearts and Hands.

Trunk or Treat was cancelled, but Cookies with Claus became a drive-in movie experience. We rented and borrowed equipment to show three short classic Christmas animations in our parking lot. Everyone drove through to pick up their goodie bag and get a group picture with Santa standing beside or behind their vehicle before moving on to find a parking spot.

In response to the Capitol attack on January 6, we sent a message to our members to respond to these events as one whose citizenship is in heaven.

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<sup>77</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, “Woodland West Update—Wednesday, December 9, 2020,” email message to church members, December 9, 2020.

Tonight, and in the coming days, please do not add fuel to the fire with your words or comments, either in person or through social media. Do not let anxiety, fear or frustration rule your heart and determine your speech. Let the peace of Christ rule in your heart. Season your speech with grace and humility.

Our world, our families, our communities and neighborhoods, and our nation need peace. God has committed to us, his people, the message and ministry of reconciliation. We are Christ's ambassadors. Our allegiance is to Jesus. We are to follow him. He is our Lord. Our hope is in him. We pray for God's kingdom to come.<sup>78</sup>

A few days later it was Martin Luther King, Jr Day. So, the preacher sent a message to the church that began with the more recent displays of hatred, anger, and anxiety in America, and invited the congregation to consider the message of a preacher who spoke about the way forward through these same things over 50 years ago. Here is an excerpt from that message.

Now for the reminder of Christ's call on our lives to love even our enemies. As you know, today is MLK Day. In light of the turmoil of this past year and the recent events at our nation's Capitol, I want to share with you some words from the heart and mind of Martin Luther King, Jr., as he attempted to pass along the words of Christ to the church where he preached long ago. But first, let me give you a little context.

Like the Apostle Paul, King did a lot of his thinking and writing while he was in jail. One of the sermons that he wrote while in jail in Georgia is "Loving Your Enemies." The quote above comes directly from that sermon. It was a sermon that he wrote for and first preached to the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church that he served from 1954-60. (You can probably find the text online, or you can grab a copy of his book, *Strength to Love*, which is a collection of several of his sermons, including this one.) It is important to understand that his message was designed and shaped for his black congregation in Montgomery, Alabama in the late 1950s. They were the original audience for this message to love even your enemies. Living in the tense times of Jim Crow laws in the deep south, the recent Montgomery bus boycott, and everything else that was going on in their world and their lives, King wanted to remind them of the words of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount as recorded in Matthew 5:43-45.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”

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<sup>78</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, “Woodland West Update—Wednesday, January 6, 2020,” email message to church members, January 6, 2020.

King observed that many people protest that this teaching is too difficult, that it demands too much. Others ridicule this teaching as proof that “the Christian ethic is designed for the weak and cowardly, and not for the strong and courageous. Jesus, they say, was an impractical idealist.”

King had a beautiful, faith-filled response to these objections.

In spite of these insistent questions and persistent objections, this command of Jesus challenges us with new urgency. Upheaval after upheaval has reminded us that modern man is traveling along a road called hate, in a journey that will bring us to destruction and damnation. Far from being the pious injunction of a Utopian dreamer, the command to love one’s enemy is an absolute necessity for our survival. Love even for enemies is the key to the solution of the problems of our world. Jesus is not an impractical idealist: he is the practical realist.

King then goes on to emphasize why loving our enemies is so incredibly important: Loving our enemies is crucial to any hope for a way out of the darkness of hate. Here is how King put it.

Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction. So when Jesus says, “Love your enemies,” he is setting forth a profound and ultimately inescapable admonition. Have we not come to such an impasse in the modern world that we must love our enemies—or else? The chain reaction of evil—hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars—must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation.

King wrote this sermon over 60 years ago for his black congregation in Alabama. But this is a message that needs to be heard by all of the congregations of America, because it is nothing less than a faithful Christian proclamation that Jesus is calling us out of the darkness of hatred and hostility and into the glorious light of love.

I want to add here what we all know. Jesus loved his enemies and Jesus prayed for his enemies while dying on a cross at the very hands of his enemies who gathered around to mock him as he died. Jesus knew full well the costly price of loving your enemies. But he also knew that it was, indeed, the ONLY way to save the world. God’s response to hate was love—as in, lovingkindness, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and grace upon grace.

It is no different today. God’s love at work in each and every one of us is the only hope for a bright future of peace and prosperity for all. As King put it, “Jesus is not an impractical idealist: he is the practical realist.” Instead of getting caught up in the toxic thinking of our world that fuels further hatred and hostilities, we must listen to Jesus: “I



tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”

It is a timeless message that God’s people need to hear again in every age as Satan attempts to do what he has been doing from the beginning—deceiving and misleading the nations into believing that the solution to their problems is to fight, hate, war and oppress others for the sake of personal gain. Our only hope for a way out of the mess we find ourselves in today is to listen to Jesus who calls us to love even our enemies.

Your brother and fellow servant in Christ,

Randy Todd<sup>79</sup>

We began promoting the Ecuador GO Mission called I have a Friend Mission in February of 2021.

The winter storm of 2021 hit right before Valentine’s Day. Throughout the challenge of power outages, we sent out email messages reminding everyone who could receive email about Project Connect asking everyone to reach out and check up on one another.<sup>80</sup> Due to the icy driving conditions, we cancelled the in-person worship assembly and sent out a worship recording as we had been doing earlier.<sup>81</sup>

On Sunday, February 7, the weekly Bible study video by the ministers shifted to a new theme based on Romans 12:1-2 and the call to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. The study was called Renew and Renovate and focused on a different passage of Scripture each week that explored another aspect of this theme.

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<sup>79</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, “Woodland West Update - Monday, January 18, 2021,” email message to church members, January 18, 2021.

<sup>80</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, “Woodland West Update—Friday, February 12, 2021,” email message to church members, February 12, 2021.

<sup>81</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, “WWCC No Worship on Campus—Everything is Online Today,” email message to church members, February 14, 2021. Nobody viewed this decision as one made in fear even though it was made as a decision of safety for everyone. It was not politicized, so it was not controversial.

On Tuesday, February 9, 2021, we had an all-ministries leadership Zoom meeting. The purpose of this short initial meeting was to ask all our ministry leaders to join with the shepherds and ministers in praying, dreaming and preparing for our church to emerge from the temporary pause the pandemic had brought into so many spaces of our life as a church.

With a firm hope for the coming year bringing an end to all of the COVID protocols that limited what we are able to do, the shepherds and ministers had arrived at the theme for 2021 as Emerge: Better, Stronger, Together. Under the banner of this theme, we wanted to bring all our ministry leaders together to hear from everyone about 2021 and beyond. What will be our collective hope and dream for our future?

Jeremiah 29:10-14 was read to remind us of the ways of God. Long ago God placed his people in the dark place of captivity. Even as they went into this long and difficult experience, God had promised to bring them back. God promised that he had plans to prosper and bless them, plans to give them hope and a future. God is doing and will do this again for us in this age. God has a plan for his people. We, like his people long ago, need to seek him with all our heart. We prayed that God would do this again, that we would seek him with all our heart, and that God would guide us into this coming year and season of emerging.

The dream we put to the ministry leaders was that we want to emerge in the following ways.

- Stronger, better, together
- Changed and committed
- Together as one body with one mission
- With contagious joy, enthusiasm, and excitement
- With thanksgiving and celebration
- Prepared and ready with a goal and a plan
- Full of hope, courage and confidence

The ministers had been tasked by the shepherds in January to flesh out the theme of Emerge. Considering all the unrest in America that was threatening to spill over and bring a divisive spirit into the church, the ministers wanted to emphasize the subtheme of together as one body and submitted We Are One as the theme for 2021. This was actually presented to the ministry leaders in this Zoom meeting as the theme for 2021. But all the questions and resulting conversations from this introductory meeting immediately brought us back to the larger theme of Emerge. We Are One was on *one* slide out of 46 slides of this initial presentation; in big bold letters, EMERGE was the emphasis on 16 slides. EMERGE was our theme for 2021 and it became the language we kept in front of our congregation the entire year.

The message from the shepherds and ministers to all the ministry leaders in this short introductory Zoom meeting was simply this: We do not know the day, but we hope and believe it is coming in 2021, and we need to be ready. Whenever this happens, we want to hit the ground ready, running and strong. The ministry leaders were instructed to begin thinking about what needs to happen between now and then so that we can emerge better, stronger, together. Two broad questions were presented.

1. With God's help how can we make EMERGE Sunday a success?

2. With God's help how can we take advantage of this event to build and sustain momentum moving forward?

We wanted everyone to pray, plan, and prepare. Everyone was invited to spend the next two weeks praying and thinking about these things and to join us for the follow-up meeting with ideas and plans in response to the following questions.

1. How can we build excitement?
2. How can we build momentum?
3. What needs to happen?
4. What do you believe people are craving?
5. What church events and projects can we invite everyone to do together?
6. What event or project does your ministry want to propose and pursue?
7. How might you bring others into your ministry's project?
8. How can we find ways to support and work together to help each other in our ministries?
9. What can we do to serve and make a difference in our community?
10. How can we find ways to work together to help each other in our events and projects?

Everyone was encouraged to talk with the people on their ministry team, ask them these questions, and come to the next meeting ready to share.

On February 23, after everyone had joined the Zoom meeting, we used the breakout group feature to let a shepherd or minister ask the ten questions to the ministry leaders assigned to them. All the responses were merged and summarized by Trey Laminack, our children's minister. This information became the basis for all our EMERGE planning moving forward.

What follows are a few of the significant events leading up to our EMERGE weekend that took place right before Memorial Day weekend.

On February 26, 2021, we began sending out information to our members about COVID-19 vaccination registration process. Our shepherds publicly shared their intention of getting vaccinated, shared their stories of what it was like, and encouraged everyone to seriously consider getting vaccinated too.

For Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021, to accommodate more people for in-person worship with our COVID-19 protocols, we opted to have two worship assemblies. The first one was held outside at 8 a.m. There were more late comers than usual for our early assembly, and the weather was a bit chilly, but everyone was excited to do something new and different.

Another bonus for everyone on Passover Sunday was a change in our COVID protocol that went into effect on that day. Wearing a mask became optional. We asked everyone to wear a mask as they entered and exited the building, but once you reached your seat, you were welcome to remove your mask. With this change, as with all others, we stressed that this is a no judgment zone and encouraged everyone to continue to respect the decisions of others.<sup>82</sup>

In-person Sunday morning Bible classes resumed on Sunday, April 18, 2021.

Our children's minister got married on Saturday, April 24. It was a small gathering of family and close friends that not only was live streamed, it also featured a lot of live and recorded musical performances by their very talented friends in various parts of the country.

On Sunday, May 2, we announced the launch of a new church app and our plans to celebrate God bringing us through the long pandemic experience with two celebration weekends. The church app provided a new resource to help members stay connected with one another and

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<sup>82</sup> Woodland West Church of Christ, "WWCOC - Sunday, April 4—WORSHIP & ONLINE Bible Classes," email message to church members, April 4, 2021.

to stay informed on all things Woodland West. Instead of having to find a hard copy of the latest bulletin or newsletter, everything they might want to know is on their phone or online at the mirror website of the church app. The app also includes a members only access to all the other members of Woodland West who are willing to share their photo and contact information in directory.

We decided to follow the pattern of Passover Sunday and have an early outdoor service on Mother's Day, Sunday, May 9. This was a bit more of a challenge as we now had in-person Bible classes at 9:30. But offering the early option was again well received. Even though we were done with all our COVID protocols in 2022, we had numerous requests to do early outdoor worship assemblies on both Passover Sunday and Mother's Day.

On Tuesday, May 11, 2021, the daily church email began pointing everyone to the church app. All the news and update, prayer requests, upcoming events, Bible memory verses, and so on, that we had been sending out via email everyday now resided on the church app. Instead of replicating all that information, the daily email included a link to the church app website.

The collective feedback from the ministry leaders regarding the upcoming EMERGE celebration was to have an event that was free of COVID protocols. Some people may choose to wear a mask or keep their distance from others, but nothing would be required. This is part of the emerging experience; we are moving forward from all these requirements and limitations.

The tricky part of planning a big event for our EMERGE weekend was the unpredictable nature of COVID. We did not want to wait too late to emerge, but we also did not want to set a date that ended up getting squashed by another surge of cases in Tarrant County. We prayerfully set and announced EMERGE weekend for May 22-23, 2021, and made a concerted push to get the word out to everyone.

The first EMERGE celebration was just for the church. We catered the meal from Abuelo's and hired a local event serving team so that all of our members could focus on celebrating and interacting with one another instead of meal preparation, serving and clean up. We even had a local garage band come and play some fun music. They performed for approximately thirty minutes after the meal was over.

Then after worship on Sunday, May 23, we had another catered meal for lunch. We had some games lined up for everyone to stick around and have some more fun, but between Saturday night and being at the church building all morning, most people left fairly quickly after lunch. So the 2025 Implementation Team and other volunteers gladly went ahead and began the process of tearing down the tables and chairs. It had been a long couple of days.

The second EMERGE celebration took place on Saturday, June 12. This was styled as a big block party for the community and anyone else who would accept our invitation to join us. We hired a local professional concert band that covers Chicago music: The Chicago Tribute Authority of Texas. Everyone was blown away by how good this band is.

In addition to our members, their neighbors and friends they invited, we also invited the Siempre Familia Iglesia de Cristo and several of the black churches in Fort Worth that we had worked with for the past few years leading up the Crusade for Christ event in the summer of 2019, June 23-28. The catalyst that ignited this cooperation between Woodland West and the black churches in Fort Worth was the shooting of the Dallas Police officers on July 7, 2016.

### **Background to the Invitation**

Steve Cloer of Southside Church of Christ reached out to several ministers of Churches of Christ in Tarrant County to see if we could put together a unity worship event to promote

healing and hope as soon as possible. The event took place at Southside and was a powerful demonstration of the Gospel's call on our lives for reconciliation and unity in Christ. This became an annual event that was moved to the larger venue of the Wilkerson-Greines Activity Center in Fort Worth and attracted churches and Christians from all over the Metroplex. Woodland West has been a part of every such gathering and several members joined the Fort Worth Citywide Unity Chorus that performed at these events.

The 2018 racial unity event was fresh after the tragic shooting of Botham Jean at the hands of an off-duty Dallas Police officer in his apartment. Jean was a graduate of Harding University and faithful member of the Dallas West Church of Christ in Dallas. Sammie L. Berry, minister of the Dallas West Church of Christ was the featured speaker for the evening.<sup>83</sup>

The Crusade for Christ is a Gospel campaign hosted by black Churches of Christ across the United States every other year. The event moves to the chosen destination city for that year. Past host cities include places like Houston, San Francisco, Orlando, Tampa, New Orleans, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Indianapolis, Montgomery, Birmingham, Dallas, San Antonio, Kansas City, Charlotte, North Carolina, and Washington, D.C.

Woodland West fully participated in the 2019 event that was hosted at the Convention Center in downtown Fort Worth. The Crusade kicked off on Saturday, with a free health fair and food distribution centers at various congregations in Fort Worth. Woodland West had members serving at both efforts. Woodland West participated in the big formal celebration banquet on the

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<sup>83</sup> To see The Christian Chronicle's report on these racial unity events, go to [christianchronicle.org/texas-christians-seek-racial-unity](http://christianchronicle.org/texas-christians-seek-racial-unity) and [christianchronicle.org/praising-god-and-promoting-unity](http://christianchronicle.org/praising-god-and-promoting-unity). Addition comments and many photos of the 2017 event can be found at journalist Don Mooney's weblog: [damoonman.wordpress.com/2017/12/02/when-we-all-get-to-heaven](http://damoonman.wordpress.com/2017/12/02/when-we-all-get-to-heaven).



eve of the Crusade. Several of our members were part of the Fort Worth Citywide Unity Chorus that performed at the beginning of each night's gathering in the convention center and the chorus also performed at the banquet Saturday night.

Woodland West joined all the Fort Worth black churches for a city-wide worship event at the convention center on Sunday morning, along with all the Crusade workers who had come from all over the country. We participated in the Crusade for Christ march and rally through the streets of downtown Fort Worth that Sunday afternoon. We hosted a bus full of workers that came to our church campus every morning to canvas the surrounding neighborhood inviting people to come to the campaign gatherings every night. After working with these volunteer campaign workers from all over the country, we shared lunch with them back at our church campus before they headed back to the hotel in Fort Worth. Woodland West's security team was asked to take the lead in organizing the volunteer security team that worked closely with the security team at the convention center.

Many of the members from the black churches that make up the larger portion of Unity Chorus came to perform during our lunch as part of our Woodland West 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration on Sunday, October 13, 2019.

Woodland West was slated to take a major role in hosting the 4<sup>th</sup> annual racial unity event at the auditorium of the Arlington High School in Arlington, Texas on Sunday, March 29, 2020. Unfortunately, this event was cancelled due to the COVID pandemic.

#### The Community Block Party

Meaningful relationships and friendships have been forged through all these partnerships. So, when we had our community block party, we invited all these people to join us for this time

of celebration if they could.<sup>84</sup> The second event was outside, and the weather unfortunately ended up being brutally hot. But everyone was just so glad to be out of their homes for a big fun event, that they found a way to endure the heat and enjoy the free food and outdoor concert event.

### **Finding the New Normal**

From this point moving forward, we lifted all our COVID protocols related to maintaining distance in seating and encourage all our ministry leaders to move forward with any ministry plans that they had suspended during the past 15 months as a result of the pandemic. Many activities and events that had been postponed immediately resumed. For example, the youth group immediately dove into the weeklong Arlington Work Camp to paint houses in Arlington with youth from all over Texas that come in for this annual week of service.

The group that waited the longest to resume was the Good Timers group. This is our group of senior saints that had been meeting regularly for a fun lunch gathering at times every month and at times once a quarter. They did not meet again for a lunch gathering until February 2023 for a Valentine's lunch the day before Valentine's Day.

We delayed resuming Wednesday night activities to allow the other routines to reemerge and to allow for time to assess how things were going and how COVID cases were tracking. The shepherds and ministers leadership team was reluctant to simply go back to doing things the way we were before COVID. The previous Wednesday night practices did not feel like they were

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<sup>84</sup> For additional information about the Crusade for Christ event in Fort Worth in 2019, see the Christian Chronicle report at [christianchronicle.org/we-wanted-this-to-be-a-jesus-crusade](https://christianchronicle.org/we-wanted-this-to-be-a-jesus-crusade).

having a meaningful impact on the life of the congregation. The primary thing members were asking about was when we might resume having fellowship meals on Wednesday nights.

In addition to resuming meetings and ministries that had been slowed down or suspended during the pandemic, we also added new ministries during the pandemic. Members of Woodland West dreamed, prayed and pursued an effort to engage with the Arlington Life Shelter to help the homeless in our community. Because of COVID protocols, engagement with the Arlington Life Shelter was initially limited to preparing and delivering meals to the shelter. Serving in their kitchen and meaningful engagement with their clients would have to wait. But two teams of volunteers stepped forward to prepare and deliver these meals for the Arlington Life Shelter on a monthly basis.

Another challenging component of the pandemic for the congregation was the timing of a renovation and expansion of the main lobby. In the past ten years there had already been initial exploratory conversations about how we might make better use of the main lobby space. COVID protocols exposed just how cramped both primary entrances to the church building are. But it was a request by a volunteer ministry leader to add a welcome and visitor information booth in the lobby space that pushed us to evaluate the entire space as opposed to simply adding more into this already crowded space.

The initial conversations about expanding the main lobby space began during the height of the pandemic experience when everything was shut down. Could this be an ideal time to expand this space with minimal disruption to the life of the church? But this timing was also offset by the juxtaposition of concerns about the impact of the pandemic both on giving and on the need to help people whose financial situation will suffer because of the economic shutdown and slowdown.

On top of all things COVID, the congregational leadership team of the shepherds and ministers took a deep dive into this conversation in 2020. This was not an impulsive decision that was lightly made with little thought. It was a serious and thorough discussion about our priorities as a congregation. The leadership team wrestled with this. Instead of allowing our facilities to be in competition with our mission as a congregation, how do we allow mission and ministry to be our priority and focus that informs and guides how we think about the long-term costs of maintaining our facilities and how we plan occasional strategic improvements that are aimed at helping us to join God in his mission to redeem the world? At the beginning of this exploration of what we might do, a firm commitment was made to not reduce our funding for global or local mission and ministry efforts to fund a facility expansion and renovation.

This conversation also exposed the lack of a comprehensive forward-thinking plan for how maintaining the facilities is to be funded. For example, the roofing company told us several years ago to be getting ready for a new roof that will exceed \$100,000 in cost. Our annual budget and planning process does not include any allocation for gradually storing up funds to cover such large expenses. This also exposed that we do not have a designed process in place for evaluating, anticipating and planning future projects related to our campus.

This proved to be a very challenging and intense conversation for our leadership team, and we found ourselves stuck for a while. We reached out to Hope Network Ministries to find someone to consult with us, help us get unstuck, and find our way forward in this big picture conversation that was sparked by a request for a welcome booth in the lobby. Jay Jarboe and Jon Mullican joined us for our weekly meeting on Tuesday, June 8, 2021.

Here is an email message summarizing the outcome of our consult Zoom meeting with Jay and Jon.

Everyone is in strong agreement that we cannot simply emerge the same and fall back into the same old routines of the past. We see ourselves at a pivotal crossroads where decisions made or not made will have lasting impact on the life of the church for good or harm. We shared and listened to what God is putting on each other's hearts, shared concerns, and asked clarifying questions.

We then worked out a proposal for a plan to spend some time sharing with the church on June 27 a challenge to be different and not simply fall back into old habits and patterns of life we all knew before the pandemic. We want to leave behind the status quo and pursue God's vision and dream instead of settling for the American Dream. We want to give our people ideas, examples and suggestions for the kind of things they can do individually, but also be planning and dreaming with them of the kind of things we want to be pursuing and doing congregationally or in smaller groups of the congregation. We want to challenge our people to go into global mission opportunities, but we also want to help everyone find and explore opportunities right here. We have been saying all along that we want to emerge better, stronger, together. That means different. . .

Any possible building changes in the near term will flow out of this larger conversation of partnering with God in pursuing his dream and vision for the world.

In many ways the conversation is not new. But I believe the pandemic experience has really opened our eyes to a new sense of urgency.<sup>85</sup>

Perhaps providentially, as part of our aim to emerge in 2021, we had invited Dan Bouchelle of Mission Resource Network to speak to our church on Sunday, June 6, 2021. We wanted him to reintroduce to our church what God is doing in the Mediterranean Rim with the bigger goal of opening our eyes to see what God is doing all around us. The message was an invitation and exhortation to daydream with God and then join God in his work to redeem the world and bless the nations.

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<sup>85</sup> Randy Todd, "Recap from Last Tuesday's Meeting with WW Shepherds and Ministers," email message sent to Jon Mullican and Jay Jarboe, June 15, 2021.

He asked us, “How is your vision?” He told stories of Muslim people flooding into Europe telling stories of having seen dreams and visions of Jesus, and asked, “If God can give dreams and visions to Muslims who’ve never known Christ while they are asleep, can’t he give those who know him big dreams and visions while we are awake?”

This was two days before our consult meeting with Jay and Jon. Dan, Jay, and Jon asked us the same questions and pointed to the same kingdom of God thinking the shepherds and ministers were already engaged in. But hearing it again from different faces and voices triggered something in the group to get us unstuck. Jon Mullican put it this way, “Often, just having a disinterested third party in the room can help a group gain clarity.”<sup>86</sup> I would not describe any of these men as disinterested, but in the space of the three days they joined us in this conversation we were ready to move forward.

On Sunday, June 27, 2021, we presented a one-two punch approach to our message to the church. First came a sermon from the preacher, “It is time for us to dream again,” followed by an appeal from one of the shepherds challenging the church to live differently for the sake of God’s kingdom, emphasizing the reality that living differently means change in our lives. Here is an excerpt from the sermon.

[A]t the very beginning of this vision, John is told that you and I play a pivotal role in God’s grand vision for the redemption and renewal of our world. God sent Jesus. Jesus sent the Spirit. And now the Spirit is sending us into the world.

Hear the word of God in Revelation 1:5-6.

“To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” (NRSV)

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<sup>86</sup> John Mullican, “Re: Quick update of WW,” email message to Randy Todd on June 16, 2020.

As if this isn't already glorious enough, as we move a bit deeper into this vision God was giving to John, we see God not only repeating this dream and vision, but expanding the vision to make it clear that God is at work to save not only his people of Israel, but to save his people of every tribe and language.

In Revelation 5:9-10 we are told that there was a new song that was sung. It went like this:

You are worthy to take the scroll  
and to open its seals,  
because you were slain,  
and with your blood you purchased for God  
persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.  
You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,  
and they will reign on the earth.

2,000 years ago, it would have been really easy to say, "No way. This will never happen." But it has happened, and it is happening! People from every tribe, language, people group, and nation are coming to know Jesus! Even Muslim people are coming to know Jesus, for the first time in 1400 years this people group is hearing the Good News of Jesus! Satan is again being thrown down. Satan again is being bound in chains.

And you and I are part of this epic story of God. Jesus has freed us from our sins, he has purchased us with his blood and made us to be a kingdom and priests who serve our God!

Our God is not finished. He has more that he wants to do in and through his people. God has great dreams and visions for what he wants this world to be. Just as he gave his people long ago dreams and visions by his Spirit, he will give us dreams and visions to pursue by his power and strength.

It is time for us to dream again, to daydream with God. Our God dreams epic big dreams. We need to dream with God, always keeping in mind that if our dreams and visions can be easily accomplished in our own power, energy and resources, then our dreams are too small. God's dreams require God's power to be realized.

The Word of God in Ephesians 3:20-21 reminds us that our God is way bigger than any vision or dream that we might have about what we might do or become.

"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."

Again, these words remind us that it is not enough to dream or imagine, we must also DO. We must work together to pursue the dreams and visions that God has given and will give to us.

It is an exciting time to be alive in this world and it is an exciting time to be a member of Woodland West.

I ask you to join me in giving your full attention to a message from your shepherds about what we can do together by the power of God that is at work within us!

The preacher stepped down from the pulpit and gave way to one of the shepherds. On behalf of the shepherds, Phil Pendergraft made an urgent plea for the church both dream with God and join God in his work. He began his message with these words.

It is time to be different! For more than a year our lives have been disrupted by the COVID-19 virus. Since last March, nearly everything has been different, almost nothing has been normal. For all of us, the usual has been disrupted – work, school, vacations, and of course, church life. For some of us, the impacts have been tragic – death of loved ones to Covid, deaths but no funerals, weddings and graduations with no celebrations, and so many other changes, from small to big have impacted our lives during this time.

And now, at last, we are emerging from these dark days, for even while much of the world continues to struggle, we are blessed to be emerging and looking forward to a return to normal, to settling back into life as it used to be, as it should be.

And this terrifies me. Because I think that it is time to be different. We cannot return to what we were. Old habits and old patterns of life have been interrupted in a once in a lifetime way. If we go back to what we were we will miss the opportunity of a lifetime to be different. And not just different for the sake of being different. Different for our God's sake.

Our slogan for Emerge has been – Stronger, Better, Together. And the intent of these words is that we will not be the same. We will be stronger, we will be better, and we will be together in these things. We will be different than we were.

Phil urged everyone to join the shepherds and minister in a season of change in our lives. He walked through a long list of ideas and ways we might change as a church—not in doctrine but in habits, priorities, and commitments. He spoke of changes in what we will do with our time, energy and money. And he shared our intention as a congregation of spending money in the coming year on ministry, mission, service and our building.



Then he concluded:

And so this is the challenge of today's message, the challenge for each of us, each member and each family, a challenge to a season of being different. A season of being different in knowing, in growing, in going, and also in giving. Over the weeks to come, we will share much more specifics about the things which I have only touched on today. But it starts today, with a commitment to being different.

And that's the homework from today's message. When you go home today, sit down with God, and with your spouse if you have one and your children if you have any, and make a commitment to be different. Talk about the things that you have heard today, and about your own hopes and dreams. And then start picking out the things that are going to be different in the coming season. Then let's get down on our knees and pray for God to change our hearts so that our actions will change too. It's time for revival – let it start with us.

The first detailed conversation with the congregation about the plan to expand and renovate the main lobby did not take place until August 29, 2021. The work eventually began on June 11, 2022, with an initial demolition and clean up event by members of Woodland West to do some work aimed at reducing the cost a bit and to allow our people to be a part of the project beyond giving their money. Because the project involved the entrance space to the children's and youth areas of the building, the classes for both ministries moved into the adult classroom spaces behind the auditorium throughout the next few months.

The grand reopening and rededication of the lobby space took place on Sunday, September 11, 2022.

A key member of our church staff, Jerry Ellis, received discouraging news about the return of throat cancer in August of 2021. He had surgery to remove the cancer and unfortunately was unable to talk after the surgery. There were many visits to doctors' offices and therapy, waiting on insurance approvals for next steps in treatment, additional surgeries, all the ongoing health challenges that came from this, and the uncertainty of whether he would be able to speak again. This was a very long, difficult, and challenging season in his life, made all the more

frustrating by his inability to tell his family and friends how he was feeling about what he was going through, and how he felt about the people he loved.

He continued in his work as the facilities coordinator but was hampered by his inability to make and receive phone calls and talk with the staff in ways that he had always done. Jerry had been a valuable member of the staff for approximately 20 years. His voice and wisdom, and the joyful enthusiasm he brought to our team was missed throughout this season.

Tragically, Jerry passed away suddenly on Wednesday, September 21, 2022. We cancelled classes that night and gave ourselves time to simply come together during and after the fellowship meal to talk about Jerry, how we were feeling in light of the news of his death, and to spend some time praying for his family as well as others who had so recently lost loved ones.

It felt appropriate that the first special event use of the newly expanded and renovated main lobby was for the visitation and funeral for Jerry Ellis, our facilities coordinator for the past 20 years, on September 27 and 28, respectively.

Backing up a few weeks, as one of the action items that resulted from the all ministry leaders EMERGE meeting on February 23, 2021, one of our shepherds, two ministers, and our women's and men's ministry leaders met with the three ministers of Siempre Familia Iglesia de Cristo to discuss ideas and ways that our congregations might partner together in ministry and find ways for our youth, men's and women's groups to share meaningful time together.

As school resumed in the fall of 2021, COVID cases again spiked in Tarrant County. In October, the shepherds reluctantly reimposed the requirement for everyone to wear a mask as they enter and leave the church building on Sundays, and we again distributed the seating in the auditorium by blocking off every other row. In both instances of sitting in every other row, one of our members did a great job of decorating the seats for this so that it looked wonderful instead

of tacky. These requirements were thankfully short lived and on Sunday, October 24, wearing a mask become optional again. As before we kept stressing respect and honor for everyone in whatever their personal decision might be related to the masks.

This was just in time for the next step out of the pandemic. In November of 2021 we began meeting every Wednesday night for meals and extended fellowship time to reconnect after all the COVID protocols and everyone's summer travels. One Wednesday night every month we brought in a food truck. We sprinkled a service project or two onto this fellowship time as the opportunity presented itself. For example, we put together care packages as part of a turkey meal and clothing giveaway event at Siempre Familia the weekend before Thanksgiving Day.

Tragedy again struck the church family when one of our key ministry leaders had an accident while putting up Christmas decorations on his house and died. Mark Roath led our A/V team and had done a tremendous amount of work in leading the charge in all the changes that came from the new equipment and effort to add live streaming to the list of responsibilities of the A/V team. He and his family have many close friendships. Our hearts broke for his immediate family and for his church family that he loved and served so faithfully. His passing left a heaviness in our hearts as we went deeper into the holiday season and prepared for the coming New Year.<sup>87</sup>

Mark's memorial service was deeply moving. Mark had served as member of the 301st Fighter Wing Maintenance Group for over 21 years and was a senior non-commissioned officer crew chief at the time of his passing. As such many of his crew, pilots, commanders and others

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<sup>87</sup> For the news release of his accident, see [www.wfaa.com/article/news/local/arlington-father-air-force-veteran-dies-falling-off-ladder-while-decorating-for-christmas/287-09b6c960-532b-4c60-863e-ed79811bd4d4](http://www.wfaa.com/article/news/local/arlington-father-air-force-veteran-dies-falling-off-ladder-while-decorating-for-christmas/287-09b6c960-532b-4c60-863e-ed79811bd4d4) and <https://people.com/human-interest/texas-father-dies-after-falling-off-ladder-while-decorating-home-for-christmas>.

from the Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base in Fort Worth, Texas, attended and participated in the memorial service, and there was a fly by at the DFW National Cemetery as part of the graveside service later in the day. And, of course, his Woodland West family and friends were there too, including his A/V crew.

This was the last significant event in the life of Woodland West before the gathering of the church for the congregational research study on Saturday, January 29.

In addition to the specific events in this congregational timeline of 2020 through 2021, there were many other stories and challenging life issues that the members of Woodland West were facing on a daily basis. There were extended illnesses and hospital stays without visits from family and friends. Hospital COVID-19 protocols limited hospital visits to phone calls. This impacted families who wanted to visit their loved ones and it prevented both church leaders and members from visiting and praying with members who were hospitalized during this time.

Members of Woodland West lost their jobs, or were furloughed, and had to deal with the loss of income that accompanied their loss of work. College students were sent home to take classes online. Several graduated from college during this time and struggled to find a job during the height of the pandemic. Families with children struggled to cope with all the losses and changes to their routines at school and at church, in the classroom and extracurricular activities in both cases. There was the combined impact of all these things on marriages, parents and families. The educators, doctors, nurses and first responders in our church family all had to cope with all the ways COVID made their work more demanding and stressful.

There were members of our congregation whose health was failing before COVID-19 came into our world, who will likely remain homebound for the rest of their lives. In fact, several members passed away and crossed over to be with the Lord during this two-year period. Several

of our members quietly kept the first commandment with a promise by honoring their parents during their time of need for persistent care and compassion and patience through the steady decline of their parents' health. There were untold stories of personal health concerns that members did not share publicly and openly either because of their private and quiet personality or because there was already so much bad news out there in the world, it just did not feel worthy of mention. Those who shared were prayed for, but not everybody shared. So not everybody realized or understood how much each family or individual was carrying during these two long years of COVID protocols and uncertainties.

And there were all the other losses that came with the pandemic: Loss of celebrations of milestone moments in our lives; loss of social interaction; loss of sleepovers, loss of date nights; loss of friendships; loss of holiday gatherings; loss of funeral gatherings; and the loss or delay of weddings celebrations, and so much more.

Life was already challenging and stressful enough. The pandemic just added a layer of stress literally on top of everything. There was no recess of life whether public or private that it did invade, permeate, and infect with its stress and uncertainty and its demand to wait for this to be over without any indication of just how long that wait would be.

Depression was rampant; so was the growing tension, frustration and anger that was seething out of the pores of America's collective skin as a nation over the conflicting information relentlessly being pushed at us about what the right approach to COVID ought to be, what the path forward ought to be, and what the timeline to reopening our world and our lives ought to be.

## **It Was Different for Everyone**

It cannot be overstated that everyone experienced the pandemic differently and uniquely, even those of us who belonged to the same congregation of local believers. Against the reports and trends of how many people suffered loss of income as a result of the pandemic, some members lived through the pandemic in a way that actually benefited them economically. They were spending less because they were forced to do less. They kept their jobs or their retirement check and maybe even got an increase. They scratched their heads when they got a stimulus check from the federal government that they did not need. As a result, those who lived in this category may not have fully appreciated just how devastating the pandemic was for much of America and some of our brothers and sisters in Christ within our own church family.

For example, it was a terrible time to need to buy a car, but you cannot always time when you need to buy a car. Some of us had the luxury of focusing on the losses that had nothing to do with what was in our bank account, in our refrigerators and on our tables. On the other hand, short of government assistance, and perhaps even with this assistance, some of us had to worry about the possible loss of home, power, water, food, or the opportunity of attending college.

There was a disparity between how we lived through and experienced the pandemic, both in the United States and globally. This disparity is well documented and will likely be a source of research and public policy debates for many years. As Saima May Sidik puts it, “The shock waves of the COVID-19 pandemic have reverberated throughout the world. But the latest data reveal that the burden of COVID and its aftermath does not rest equally.”<sup>88</sup> People with

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<sup>88</sup> Saima May Sidik, “How COVID Has Deepened Inequality — In Six Stark Graphics,” *Nature* 606 (June 2022): 638, <https://media.nature.com/original/magazine-assets/d41586-022-01647-6/d41586-022-01647-6.pdf>. For specific data related to the United States, see Gertrude R Gauthier, Jeffrey A Smith, Catherine García, Marc A Garcia and Patricia A Thomas, “Exacerbating Inequalities: Social Networks, Racial/Ethnic Disparities, and the

disabilities or mental health challenges, people who live alone and in isolation, people whose jobs did not allow them to carry on and work remotely, people whose jobs were deemed nonessential, people who belong to a specific socio-economic demographic, people who belong to a disadvantaged ethnic group in their society, experienced the pandemic and its aftermath differently from those who are unlike them in any of these ways. Again, this was true in America and around the world, and it was true in the Metroplex and around the room in any church in our communities.

We also experienced the pandemic differently dependent upon our political convictions and the source of our news and information, perhaps especially in the United States and Texas in particular. Because everything about the pandemic became politicized so quickly, and no doubt because a presidential election took place with a change in the White House at the end of the first year of the pandemic, one's political persuasion and allegiances shaped how we perceived and received news and information about the pandemic. For example, a survey of 4,411 people conducted in January of 2022 revealed a very clear difference in the approach to life during the pandemic based on whether one identified as Republican or Democrat. Respondents were asked that in response to the Omicron variant of COVID-19 whether they were going to make changes to their normal activity to prioritize safety and public health or continue their normal activity as much as possible, 65% of Democrats indicated they would make changes and 65% of Republicans indicated they would continue normal activity.<sup>89</sup>

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COVID-19 Pandemic in the United States,” *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B* 76.3 (March 2021): e88–e92. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbaa117>. For disparity related to education in America, see Clea Simon, “How COVID Taught America About Inequity in Education,” *The Harvard Gazette* (July 9, 2021). [news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/07/how-covid-taught-america-about-inequity-in-education](https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/07/how-covid-taught-america-about-inequity-in-education).

<sup>89</sup> Sample summary results of this survey were reported by David Leonhardt in “Two Covid Americas,” *New York Times* (January 25, 2022). <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/25/briefing/covid-behavior-vaccinated->

This observation echoed the result of an early Pew Research Center survey near the beginning of the pandemic experience. This survey indicated that “a vast majority of Republicans (76%) say the news media have exaggerated the risks associated with the virus.” Only 17% of Republicans believed the media was getting it about right. On the other hand, 80% of Democrats felt like the media was doing very well or somewhat well in covering the pandemic outbreak.<sup>90</sup> Not surprisingly, the results of the Pew Research Center’s American News Pathways project throughout the first year of the pandemic concluded that there had “consistently been dramatic divides between different groups of Americans based on where people get their information about what is going on in the world.”<sup>91</sup>

We even experienced the pandemic differently based on whether or not we, or a member of our household, or someone who is close to us, got COVID-19, whether or not it was a serious illness, whether or not it required hospitalization, whether or not it became life-threatening and/or resulted in the death of a loved one.

Our members who worked in hospitals as doctors and nurses, and their families, experienced COVID in a way that was unique to them. Amina Khan expressed this difference of perspective as “two Americas:” “the one inside hospital walls, where an influx of COVID-19

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unvaccinated.html. Accessed March 21, 2023. Entire survey and results can be found at [https://assets.morningconsult.com/wp-uploads/2022/01/24150429/2201068\\_topline\\_PARTNERSHIP\\_COVID\\_SURVEY\\_Adults\\_v1\\_SH-1.pdf](https://assets.morningconsult.com/wp-uploads/2022/01/24150429/2201068_topline_PARTNERSHIP_COVID_SURVEY_Adults_v1_SH-1.pdf). Accessed March 21, 2023.

<sup>90</sup> Amy Mitchell and J. Baxter Oliphant, “Americans Immersed in COVID-19 News; Most Think Media Are Doing Fairly Well Covering It,” *Pew Research Center* (March 18, 2020). <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2020/03/18/americans-immersed-in-covid-19-news-most-think-media-are-doing-fairly-well-covering-it/>. Accessed March 21, 2023.

<sup>91</sup> Amy Mitchell, Mark Jurkowitz, J. Baxter Oliphant and Elisa Shearer, “How Americans Navigated the News in 2020: A Tumultuous Year in Review,” *Pew Research Center* (February 22, 2021). <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2021/02/22/how-americans-navigated-the-news-in-2020-a-tumultuous-year-in-review/>. Accessed March 21, 2023.



patients are struggling to breathe; and the one outside, where few seem to acknowledge the full threat of the virus.”<sup>92</sup>

The same is true of our educators and teachers, and our families with children. The daily routines of everyone in the education process were completely disrupted by the pandemic in very different ways than our members who do not have children in school.

Any of our members whose responsibilities included making decisions about the welfare of a company and its employees, including decisions about employees coming to work or working remotely, and COVID protocols that would be put in place in the workplace during the pandemic experienced the pandemic differently from members who were merely on the receiving end of those decisions and the consequences of these decisions.

Our congregational leaders experienced the pandemic differently from the members. The leaders were meeting every week via Zoom. There was weekly interaction in this meeting as well as in phone calls before or after these meetings. The typical member at home may or may not have been having this level of regular engagement and interaction with fellow members of Woodland West. The leaders carried the burden of sifting through the latest data and recommendations from the health community as well as federal, state and local governments declarations and recommendations in order to make informed decisions about what to do now. Members waited to hear what decision would be made.

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<sup>92</sup> Amina Khan, “Coronavirus Today: A Tale of Two Americas,” *LA Times* (August 6, 2021). <https://www.latimes.com/science/newsletter/2021-08-06/coronavirus-today-aug-6-2021-coronavirus-today>. Accessed March 21, 2023.

Some members carefully read and considered the announcements and information from the congregational leaders. Some even responded to these announcements to provide their feedback of agreement or dissent. Others probably fell prey to information overload and largely ignored these messages. Some of us were already doing that, so this wave after wave of “here is the latest news” did not help.

For the members in this latter category, their minds and attitudes were not informed by the instructions and guidance provided by the shepherds and ministers for no other reason than they were not informed. As a result, their perception, feelings and attitudes, whether good, bad or indifferent, about why decisions were being made would have been based on a host of other things—on their relationship with the shepherds and ministers, on their level of trust for those in authority, on whatever information they are hearing from the sources they are reading or listening to, on the person of influence they look to in such life matters, on a lack of informational context from their church leaders, or on a mixture of these and a host of other such things. Their perception and experience of the pandemic as it relates to the life of the congregation was inevitably different from those who sought to be informed by reading the email messages from church leaders or watching the videos that were embedded in these email messages.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Format of the Project**

The purpose of this project was to engage with the members of Woodland West to explore how the pandemic experience has shaped the congregation in helpful and hopeful ways or in ways that may need reflection and attention both by congregational leadership and the members.

Due to the erratic nature of the spread of COVID-19 and the sudden rise and fall of cases in the United States and Tarrant County, Texas, in particular, it was difficult to find a feasible process for gathering information in a way that was both timely and safe. The approach that was chosen was to gather the members in the largest space on the church campus, the gymnasium, and walk them through group discovery exercises by asking participants to answer open-ended questions about our faith and hope, and our fears and struggles, during the pandemic experience.

Every adult member of Woodland West was invited to a Day of Discovery, Renewal and Hope, a congregational research study. It was promoted as a study that aims to explore how we have been shaped by the pandemic experience and how we have perceived God has been at work among us during this time to shape and strengthen our faith and to prepare us for our future.

All participants had to be 18 years old or older and were required to sign an informed consent form. Those who were willing and able to participate convened in the church gymnasium on Saturday morning, January 29, 2022. Unfortunately, on the heels of the holidays COVID cases in Tarrant County spiked again, so some of our members who otherwise would

have gladly participated in this congregational project, continued to remain cautious and did not venture out.

### **Description of the Participants**

Forty-four members participated in the gathering on January 29. In an attempt to gain a wider perspective from additional members, the same questions asked in the Day of Discovery event were also made available as an online survey. An additional eleven members participated in this manner.

A high percentage of those who participated in the project were part of the larger leadership team of the congregation: either a shepherd, deacon, ministry leader, minister, staff member, or the spouse of someone who serves in one of these roles. Everyone who participated in the online survey fell into one of these categories, and twenty of the forty-four who participated in person at the Day of Discovery event fell into one of these categories. Just over seventy percent of those who participated in the project were a part of the larger leadership team of the church.

An additional nineteen members who participated have been heavily involved in the life of the congregation. So, most of those who participated, 85 percent, were fully vested in the life of the church before and during the pandemic. This is not surprising. These are the primary shareholders of the congregation, and these are the members most likely to give of their time for the sake of the congregation.

There were only three participants under the age of twenty-five. Five participants were African American, and the remaining participants would identify as white.

### **Day of Discovery Process**

Members were asked to sort themselves to a round table in the gym with two other members. Everyone was asked to avoid sitting at a table with other family members. Once everyone had been seated, the process was explained with the following steps.

STEP ONE: Each question has a unique introduction. Carefully listen to the oral introduction that will be given by Randy before each question is asked at the table.

STEP TWO: Appoint someone to write down each person's response at your table. Rotate the person doing this as needed. It was stressed to please print and make sure that the written responses are legible to everyone at the table so that this response can be included in the study.

STEP THREE: Carefully read the question to the group at your table. Choose one person to give his/her answer first and listen carefully to his/her response.

STEP FOUR: After the first person has given her/his response, the person writing down their response should read back what they wrote down. The person who gave this response can then tweak what was written to make sure it accurately captures what he/she said.

STEP FIVE: Repeat steps 2 through 4 until everyone at the table has given their response. Once everyone has given their response, interact with each other about your different responses and be ready to share something from your table with the larger group once everyone has finished answering this question.

After sufficient time had passed for everyone at the table to have an opportunity to answer the question, we concluded that question and gave ourselves a short break. We allowed two or three tables to send a representative to share what they felt were meaningful highlights from the responses they had shared and heard at their table. These were unscripted and

unrehearsed and allowed everyone to hear responses that potentially were different in tone and nature from the responses given at the table where they were seated. After two or three tables had shared their responses, we moved to the next question.

To keep the interaction fresh, we asked everyone to shuffle themselves to a table with two new faces. This was done after question 2 and question 4.

### **Day of Discovery Questions**

What follows are the seven questions of the congregational study along with the oral introductions that were read immediately before each question was asked at the table and everyone given an opportunity to give their responses.

**Introduction to Question One:** There have been many challenging and difficult things that have come into our lives because of the pandemic experience. There have been a lot of loss, pain, uncertainties, anxieties, frustrations and tension. We want to think specifically about the way the pandemic disrupted our life at Woodland West as a church family, as a community of faith. Think about everything that happened. Think about everything that got cancelled or suspended—worship, Bible studies, fellowship gatherings. Think about all the ministries and plans that either got suspended or had to be adjusted significantly. Think about everything that got moved online. Think about how difficult it has been to stay informed on what is going on in the life of the church. Think about how difficult it has been to stay connected with each other and engaged in each other's lives. And think about what we lost during this time—seeing one another's faces, being able to touch one another, being able to share meals together and have good, long conversations, being able to celebrate together and grieve together, being able to

worship together, sing together, pray together, reflect on Scripture together, and all the other things we do when we come together.

**Question One:** When you think back over the past two years, what has been the hardest part (or parts) for you in dealing with the way the pandemic experience disrupted our life as a church?

**Introduction to Question Two:** We spent some time in the past two years emphasizing our faith, hope and conviction in the goodness and faithfulness of our God. We believe what the Apostle Paul believed and wrote in Romans 8:28. “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

**Question Two:** In what ways have you sensed or seen God at work among his people here at Woodland West throughout the pandemic experience? What God-stories have you seen, heard or participated in that encouraged and moved your heart?

**Introduction for Questions Three and Four:** The old proverb says that necessity is the mother of invention. During the past two years it became necessary for us to do new and different things in our lives to try to meet the real needs and demands of life. The same is true of our life together as a church family. Think about all the things we have done to try to take care of each other, to stay connected, to encourage one another, to get everyone involved, to keep everyone in the Word of God, to reach our community, and all the efforts to emerge better, stronger, together. There have been concerted efforts to invite and challenge everyone to do their part in these congregational efforts, and there have been lots of organic and spontaneous efforts initiated by individuals, entirely on their own in response to this challenge.

**Question Three:** What have been the best things that we have done as a church during the pandemic and how have you participated in these?

**Question Four:** As you reflect on everything that has happened in the past 2 years, if you are being completely honest, what has been your biggest fear for what might happen to the church in America, and Woodland West in particular?

**Introduction to Question Five:** Even though we typically avoid trials and hardships, we know and believe that these experiences can ultimately be beneficial and good for us. The Word of God in James 1:2-4 encourages us to look at life's challenges in this way. "My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing."

There is no doubt that the pandemic experience has tested our faith. There is no doubt that this testing has shaped us and is continuing to shape us. But we want to answer this question with hope. We know that God has been at work in everything that has happened to bring about good for his people. We know that trials, challenges and hardships can ultimately prove to be beneficial for us. So, as you answer this next question, think about your greatest hope for the future of this church.

**Question Five:** If the challenges and difficulties of the pandemic experience transform just one thing in the life of this church for our good, what do you hope this one thing is? Or, to put it another way, how would you complete this statement? "I hope the pandemic experience causes us to \_\_\_\_\_."

**Introduction to Question Six:** The Word of God informs us that we have a mutual obligation to one another as members of the body of Christ. Hebrews 10:24-25 puts it this way: "And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the



Day approaching.” At Woodland West Church of Christ, we have long called ourselves a fellowship of encouragement. No doubt many of us initially keenly felt the withdrawal of this mutual encouragement that we give to each other when we come together as a church. And even when we began meeting again in person, we still felt this withdrawal because of all the COVID protocols and those that have stayed away because of continued health concerns.

**Question Six:** During the past 2 years of the pandemic, what were the most meaningful experiences for you both in giving encouragement to others and in receiving encouragement from others?

**Introduction to Question Seven:** In the story of Nehemiah, when Nehemiah heard about what was happening back in Jerusalem, he was heartbroken and distressed about all the bad news; and he was moved to do something about it. He mourned. He fasted. And he prayed to the Lord. He wanted to do something about it. He wanted to make a difference. Nehemiah could not settle for pursuing to rebuild his own life without concern for the larger community of God’s people. At great personal risk he dared to rearrange his life for the sake of his people. When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, in Nehemiah 2:12 Nehemiah described his desire to rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem as something God had put into his heart to do. Instead of staying stuck in his grief about what had happened and resigning himself to a new and tragic reality for God’s people, God gave Nehemiah a dream to pursue renewal and redemption for a better future. Nehemiah shared this dream with God’s people, and they came together to pursue this dream as one. In the face of huge obstacles and obstinate resistance, they rearranged their lives, they did what none of them had ever done before, and they rebuilt the walls together. This choice made an immediate impact on the life of the city, and it changed the course of its future.

For the past two years our lives have been disrupted in many ways. We did not choose these disruptions. They simply happened to us. They forced their way into our lives, and we had to adjust to them. Now, we have a choice to make. We can throw up our hands and resign ourselves to a new and tragic reality, or we can, in the spirit of Nehemiah and all of God's people in Jerusalem so long ago, pursue a God-given dream of renewal, redemption and rebuilding for a better future.

**Question Seven:** What will it take to motivate you to choose to disrupt and rearrange your life again in order to pursue renewal with your church family and to rebuild what has been lost and destroyed?

### **Sorting through and Evaluating the Responses**

The process of sorting through the responses in an effort to hear and evaluate what had been shared by the members of Woodland West was conducted by a small team of members who had participated in the Day of Discovery. The congregation research study team consisted of three men, the preaching minister, the youth minister, and the children's minister, and three women, the nursery coordinator, the licensed professional counselor, and one member who does not serve in the capacity of a ministry leader. This last team member has many years of experience in research and analysis. Five of the team members were white, and one was African American.

The written responses in the booklets at the tables were anonymous. Names were not written on the booklets. The shuffling of members to new tables after answering questions 2 and 4 added to the randomness of the responses in any given booklet. The only way anyone knew

exactly how someone responded to any given question was if that person was at your table for that question, or by the publicly shared summary responses of a table at the Day of Discovery.

The booklets were gathered up, divided up, and then distributed to several volunteers who were glad to take the handwritten notes and type them into a Word document. These were then compiled into one master document that had all of the congregational responses to each question. The master document was distributed to the six members of the congregational research study team, along with the following instructions that were carefully explained in the initial team meeting hosted on Zoom. All team members were given the opportunity to ask clarifying questions until everyone was satisfied that they understood their assignments.

### **Instructions for the Woodland West Congregational Research Study Team**

**Confidentiality is of utmost importance.** We need to maintain strict confidentiality to protect all our members from harm. Please do not share any of the data or documents of this project with anyone else. This project is exploring questions that evoked some anticipated emotional responses. For this reason, it is imperative that you do not talk with others about the responses you will read—especially anything that is negative or critical. You do not know who gave a response and we do not always know why someone feels the way they do. We do not want to wound anyone—intentionally or unintentionally—with our words or comments. So, please maintain strict confidentiality and do not waste time wondering to yourself, “Who said that?” if you read something that evokes a strong emotional response of your own.

When we meet together to share our individual observations about the congregational study, we will have time to process together any feelings or concerns anyone may have in

response to any response given to the questions of the congregational survey. I am also available to all of you in advance of that next meeting, if you need to talk.

**Step ONE is anticipation and preparation.** Before you start reading through the congregation's responses, please make sure you do this first.

First, take some time to write down a simple prayer that God will guide you and the rest of the congregational study team in what we hear, see and discern as we work on this project together. Ask the Lord to guide you (us) and to open (y)our eyes, minds, and hearts to discover what he wants us to realize. Ask the Lord to give us wisdom and courage so that we are not discouraged by anything in this process.

Second, take some time to write down what you are expecting to hear from the church. In summary form, write down the kind of things you anticipate you will hear in the responses to the questions approximately 55 of your brothers and sisters at Woodland West answered about the past two years. Whether good, bad, or indifferent, what are you expecting?

Third, be sure to keep both your written prayer and your written expectations with all of your other documentation. You will be sharing these with the congregational study team when we come together to share our individual discoveries, observations and reflections.

**Step TWO is discovery.**

**Read the responses.** Read through the congregational responses to the first question. Important NOTE: Do each step with one question at a time.

**Create categories and groupings.** As you go through the responses to this question, use whatever method you want to attempt to sort the responses into categories. For example, put all the apples in one group, the oranges in another, and the grapes in yet another. Some responses may fall into more than one category. If so, put that response into every category that it falls into.

**Define or describe your categories.** At some point in the sorting process, you will want to create category labels, descriptions, or summaries. Use whatever language is helpful to you. You can do this as you see some distinct grouping patterns emerging, or you can simply wait until you have all your responses grouped and then attempt to give them an appropriate label and description.

There may be some responses that are unique outliers that defy being grouped with other responses. If so, put all the outliers into an umbrella “Unique Responses” category. We will sort those out when we meet as the congregational study team.

**Review your categories.** Once you have finished sorting all the responses, take a few minutes to think about your category labels and descriptions. Make whatever adjustments you need to clarify the categories and write a clear summary statement for each category knowing that you will be sharing this with the rest of the congregational study team when we come together to share our findings with each other.

**Step THREE is reflection.**

Now that you have sorted out the responses to the first question into groupings and categories, spend some time reflecting on the responses by answering the following questions. Write your answers with a mind of sharing this with the congregational study team.

1. What themes or patterns do you detect in the responses? Take advantage of your categories or groupings to answer this question. But flesh this out a bit. Write a more thorough summary statement. Be aware that your category groupings may contain multiple themes that are embedded within the larger grouping. Identify, name, and describe all the themes you detect.
2. What surprised you in the responses? What did you not expect to hear?
3. Turn the last question around. What did you expect to hear in the responses that you did not hear? What did nobody say that you expected someone to say?
4. What rises up in the responses as meaningful and significant to you? Why?

5. In what ways did the congregation see and name God at work in this particular matter?

**Step FOUR is to repeat steps TWO and THREE until you have worked through all seven questions.**

**Step FIVE is reflection and discernment on the big picture.**

Review your observations in Step TWO for all the seven questions of the congregational survey, then answer the following questions based on what you discovered in the congregational responses.

1. What are the prevailing themes or patterns (good, bad or indifferent) that emerged from the congregational survey as a whole?
2. What are the prevailing emotional responses and feelings that were evoked by the questions of the congregational survey? Why do you think this happened?
3. Based on this, how do you sense that the pandemic experience has shaped us as a congregation, for better or worse? What are the various and nuanced ways that it has shaped us?
4. In what significant ways did the congregation see God at work among us? And what ways do you believe or suspect that God has been at work among us that were unnamed? That is, in what ways may we all have simply taken it for granted that God has been at work among us, but nobody bothered to name it?
5. Based on the responses, how do you sense that the faith and hope of the congregation for our future has been shaped? In what ways do you sense the responses suggest it has been beneficial to us and in what ways to you sense it may have dampened or discouraged our faith and hope? Why do you think this happened?
6. Based on the responses, how do you sense that our collective sense of the importance of the church has been shaped through the experience of the past two years? Think both in terms of the importance of the church as a community of engagement and mutual encouragement through our meetings, relationships, and practices, as well as the importance of the church as the people of God who are called to join God in his mission to redeem the world.
7. As you answer this final cluster of questions, infuse into every question and response a profound sense of wondering **“what might God be up to?”** What do we do with all this information? What might God be telling us or revealing to us in these responses? How might these observations inform us as a congregation about our direction into

the future and immediate next steps? What new goals do we need to set for ourselves in response to everything that has happened and the new challenges and opportunities that are now before us? What existing goals and priorities need to be reaffirmed? What conversations do we need to have with ourselves? Where do we go from here as we hope and pray to EMERGE better, stronger, together?

### **A Summary of the Congregational Responses**

***Question One: When you think back over the past two years, what has been the hardest part (or parts) for you in dealing with the way the pandemic experience disrupted our life as a church?***

For most of our members, the hardest part of the pandemic experience in one way or another was a result of what none of us had ever imagined possible—out of concerns from a pandemic emergency the church would not come together for worship for a period of approximately three months. This was a totally unexpected reality. As one member put it succinctly, “The closing of the church was a difficult and big deal to me.” Our last in-person congregational worship before the temporary break was March 15, 2020. Our first in-person congregational worship to end this break was June 7, 2020. This break lasted exactly twelve weeks, but it felt like an eternity.

The overwhelming majority of the responses to this question focused on what was lost during the time that Woodland West suspended in-person worship and the many other gatherings of the church, as well as what was lost through the COVID protocols that were initially in place when we first began meeting together for in-person worship. Most of the responses (41) centered on the loss of physical and social interaction and the many things that are part of this phenomenon—fellowship, encouragement, relational and emotional support, and the simple human experience of touch through hugs and shaking hands. Losing these things resulted in

feeling isolated and disconnected from the church family and the various groups within the church to which this person belongs. Some mentioned feelings of loneliness. This category of responses is summed up well by the two members who said, “The disruption of relationships has been the hardest thing,” and “The most difficult experience was the isolation from the church family.”

Specific concern was expressed for senior saints, youth, and children and the potential long-term impact the pandemic will have on these groups. How long will it take for everyone to feel connected and have a genuine sense of belonging? If there were hurt feelings during this time, what will need to happen to bring healing? Several parents specifically mentioned how difficult it had been keeping their children connected to Christian circles of fellowship and encouragement.

This feeling of loss was not limited to the gatherings of the church for worship, communion (the Lord’s Supper), Bible study, ministry, and fellowship. Members lamented the inability to visit with people in assisted living facilities, hospitals, funeral homes, and all the other spaces where Christians live as the people of God. During the height of the pandemic season, we were not allowed to interact with these people who especially needed the physical presence of others as a visible and tangible expression of love and compassion.

And this feeling of loss was still with us in 2022. As one member put it, the hardest part of this has been the reality that “when we resumed in-person services and some folks did not return. I knew they were doing other things in public, but they were not attending church. It hurt to see people not coming back.”

Throughout the pandemic the shepherds and ministers repeatedly appealed to all members to reach out to one another to encourage one another and help everyone feel valued and



connected; yet some of those who did these things shared comments like, “I was always expected to reach out to others, but no one ever reached out to me.” Between the shepherds and ministers, every household was supposed to receive at least one call on a regular basis, on top of whatever the rest of the church was doing. One has to wonder if we grew weary in doing good, and some of our members did not receive the calls they needed, or if the need was simply greater than these calls could supply, so that it felt like nobody ever called. Perhaps someone else in this person’s family received these calls and “no one ever reached out” directly to the rest of the family, including this individual.

Beyond these many different feelings of loss of fellowship and connection, the second most mentioned hardest part in dealing with the way the pandemic experience disrupted our life as a church centered on how polarizing the pandemic experience had been. Eight members mentioned concerns about how the pandemic experience has brought another layer of division within the church.

Some expressed feelings of anxiety about the uncertainty of what others were thinking and feeling about everything related to COVID-19, especially if it was different from how they felt. Knowing how divided America was as a nation over just about any and every matter related to COVID protocols and government recommendations, some members were concerned about how their interactions with others might be perceived or even misperceived.

Others were more explicit. These members wrestled with what they categorized as mean words and ugly behavior that they saw and heard in the world and wondered how it might be the same within the body of Christ. One member put it this way: “The hardest part has been the division created by differing viewpoints, and the unkind expression of these viewpoints, rather than the Christian love expected of members of the family.” Another member echoed this

response and mentioned the riots and other stories of anger and violence in the media and said that in response to these events “people from our church used social media to express opinions which I felt caused more divisive and hurtful feelings.” Other members agreed that this was the hardest part. One said, “Different views, beliefs, opinions caused controversy especially if you did not hold others’ views.” Another said, “Division; this was either after or during the political campaign, so everything was already tense within the church.”

An additional member’s entire response was, “Communicating to other people that the information being stated about the pandemic is lies.” There is unfortunately no indication of what information this person is referring to. Is this information from the WHO, the CDC and local health officials, or is this the counter information that calls all that information into question? Either way, this is another response that points to the tension, anxiety, and frustration of which medical and epidemiological experts we should be listening to.

A third category of responses blended the first two previously mentioned matters into one and focused them on the leadership of the congregation. One person said, “I felt a huge disappointment with my church leaders and felt that they made more decisions out of fear rather than faith.” Another member responded, “I was hurt and angry and had very strong emotions toward the church leadership for shutting the church down. We were doing what the world wanted, not letting our light shine. It looked like a lack of faith from the leadership.” Another member responded simply, “The fear among our leadership.” In response to the next question, this member also referred to the COVID-19 pandemic as a “scamdemic.”

Without naming the congregational leadership, others responded in similar manner, “We have let the government run over us. Letting the government tell us when, where, and how to worship.” And another said, “It was hard when we stopped meeting because it felt like a lack of

trust in the Lord to do his will.” Without naming the decision to suspend our assemblies, another member stated, “I felt the elders were very disconnected from the church needs during this time. I feel that we were being like the world and being ruled by fear.”

The question was not, “How did you feel about the decision to temporarily suspend the worship assemblies of the church in response to the pandemic?” The question was “When you think back over the past two years, what has been the hardest part (or parts) for you in dealing with the way the pandemic experience disrupted our life as a church?” But for at least six of our members, the decision by our leaders to suspend our gatherings for twelve weeks was the hardest part. Their disappointment in the decision of their church leaders apparently overwhelmed everything else in the past two years.

This disagreement, disappointment, and frustration with church leadership extended beyond the decision to suspend our church gatherings. An additional three members complained about the COVID protocols when the church resumed meeting. Two members named the expectation to wear a mask in our worship assemblies as the hardest part for them in dealing with the way the pandemic experience disrupted our life as a church.

The mandated wearing of masks became a huge hot button in America during the pandemic. So, it was not surprising that this was mentioned in the congregational study—nine times in response to this initial question. For example, two members indicated their hurt and disappointment in knowing of members who did not return to worship assembly because they did not want to wear a mask. This was not surprising.

Wearing a mask to our in-person worship assemblies did not become optional until Passover Sunday, April 4, 2021. Masks were required for nine long months. Nobody liked doing this, including the shepherds. But this remained the recommendation of medical and health

officials throughout this time, even when we all had grown weary of wearing these masks. The only time we were permitted to remove our mask was to eat and drink the Lord's Supper.

One of the glaring weaknesses of this research project was the inability to ask for clarification on statements that begged for more information. What was it about wearing the masks that made this the most difficult thing out of everything that had been disrupted or lost during the pandemic? Was it the most difficult thing, or was it more honestly the most annoying and tiring thing? For example, if the context of this question had been a hospital visit or a home visit to see someone that was known to be at risk from COVID-19, would the mask have been mentioned?

Other responses that specifically mentioned the requirement to wear masks focused on the outcome of wearing masks. There was a keen sense of the loss of seeing faces and smiles, and the lack of physical contact through hugs and handshakes during the time of distancing that was initially practiced when we first came together. It felt awkward and strange and was a barrier to reconnecting in the way everyone wanted. This was part of the overall yuckiness of coming back together with COVID protocols because of the way it dampened the overall experience of being together, encouraging one another, and fully sharing life together. Altogether there were eight members who mentioned that COVID protocols were hard because of the way these kept us at a distance from one another even when we were together.

These responses stand in stark contrast to the member who responded that the hardest part for him/her was "the difficulty of protecting our parents who are high risk, which resulted in feeling disconnected from everyone else. We were not able to stay and be a part of conversations with other members because of needing to protect our parents. I felt that I had to leave right away."

Likewise, although this data was not captured in the Day of Discovery, several members had conveyed to church leaders that the reason they were staying away from the assembly was because their jobs required them to be out and about in public. They did not want to risk coming to the church assembly and contaminating someone else, especially someone who would be at high risk if they were to come down with COVID-19. Concern for others moved them to give up their right and opportunity to be with the church on the Lord's Day.

One member lumped wearing masks into the larger narrative of the pandemic. "Mine would be wearing masks, all the time, even in church." Perhaps the feeling of another member was also rooted in the larger story of the tension in America over mask mandates, but this member simply said, "I did not feel it was appropriate for anyone to mandate I wear a mask when I did not believe in it. I was comfortable coming without. Those that want to wear a mask can and if they don't want to that should be their choice as well." Yet another member gave a litany of six things that were hard about the experience and included, "having to wear a mask when I felt they were ineffective according to scientific reports and studies."

Most likely in response to hearing one of these comments about masks at the table, instead of answering the question of what the hardest part of the pandemic experience had been, one member simply stated, "I supported the decision to temporarily shut down and the masks." Again, the lack of the opportunity to ask someone to clarify their answer impacted the gathering of information. To this person we would have wanted to repeat the question and ask, "How would you answer this question?" But this person's response is an indication of how the differing attitudes about COVID protocols were present in the church in the same way that they were present everywhere else, and how the tension over these matters commanded our attention.

Other members mentioned some of the other COVID protocols that were part of our gatherings when we first resumed meeting for in-person worship as being the hardest part of the past two years. They mentioned things like sitting six feet apart from other households, not being able to hug or shake hands, and again, not being able to see one another's faces. One person put it this way, "People with differing points of view were forced to conform to one viewpoint or policy. No one should be able to tell me that I can't hug if I'm ok with it and the other person is ok with it."

The instructions from the shepherds in the matter of COVID-19 protocols were given in the explicitly stated context of everyone showing concern for others, not simply for ourselves—or in other words, to put the interests of others ahead of your own in the spirit of Philippians 2:1-5. Specifically, this was an appeal to show concern in our church gatherings for members who were at higher risk should they succumb to COVID-19 as well as for members who were caretakers for those who were at higher risk. On the other hand, these responses from members that complained of the congregational COVID protocols were rooted in the mindset of freedom, individual choice, and personal preference. The tension between these two perspectives was a big part of the pandemic experience in America. This tension fueled angry and sometimes violent interactions all over the nation, right along with the tension between the perspectives that COVID-19 pandemic is a serious health emergency versus it is a scamdemic, the competing perspectives of the effectiveness of wearing masks, COVID-19 vaccines, and a host of other COVID-19 protocols, and the ongoing debate about whether children should be back in school versus the need for online schooling to extend until the spread of COVID-19 had been brought under control.

The tension of the American priority of individual rights with the Gospel priority to put the welfare and interests of others ahead of your own—that is, to put the interests of others above your individual rights—is very real challenge for Christians who live and breathe and drink deeply of the American experience. Speaking into this tension of strong differences of opinions, one member stated this was the hardest part of how the pandemic disrupted our life as a church. For this person it was the confusion and uncertainty surrounding what is right. When it came down to what should be done it felt like everyone in the media and other sources outside of the church was angry and fighting. This person appreciated the fact that he/she did not see this in the elders. But given how contentious COVID-19 made so many people in America, it made the person feel “cautious and on edge” about where various members of the congregation were in their personal COVID concerns. When we first came back together for in-person worship this person said that he/she felt “very on edge” in interacting with other members, wondering, “What if they are not only offended by my choice, but also angered?”

Finally, there was a complete outlier response. One member stated that he/she did not see the pandemic as a disruption to the church. “The church is the people and I saw it as a time to adjust, rethink what the church meant to each of us, and be called on to serve in a different way. . . I believe I saw people doing more for God, . . . I saw God’s hand more at work.”

***Question Two: In what ways have you sensed or seen God at work among his people here at Woodland West throughout the pandemic experience? What God-stories have you seen, heard or participated in that encouraged and moved your heart?***

The overwhelming majority of the responses focused on how God was at work among us to move us to action. Out of the 56 responses to this question 33 members indicated they saw

God moving us to do good deeds throughout the pandemic. People made visits to one another wearing masks and maintaining distance to check up on members who are shut in and do whatever was needed for them. The pandemic did not shut the church down; it opened the church up in new ways. Our eyes were opened to the many needs and opportunities to serve and encourage others and we were moved and compelled by the compassion of Christ to do something to make a difference. We saw “more people reaching out to one another and more people coming to God” and “more people trying to keep in touch with one another during the week by phone calls and facetime.” This idea of “more” and “many” people was stated repeatedly.

Others spoke of seeing God at work in his people in the way they stepped up when needed. As one person put it, “God brought out the best in us. There was a lot of kindness expressed, and I saw people step up in unexpected ways. It has been encouraging to see all of this.” Another member replied, “God moved people to go above and beyond to take care of people who needed help, including just checking in on people, to stand in the gaps created by all of the changes, and to do whatever was needed at the time, including all of the work to make online worship happen.”

Others pointed to the creative ways people found to serve and be present with one another even with the COVID protocols, like outdoor brunch gatherings. Members made phone calls to other members they had never met before. Groceries and medicines were picked up and delivered. Rides were offered to get people to doctor’s appointments and other places they needed to be. People saw God in the way God cared for them through the church that never closed. As one person said, “I experienced the servant hearts of our congregation when I was going through COVID myself. I also heard about the congregation supporting others in the same



way. That was very encouraging.” Another responded, “People went out of their way to connect to me, a new member, even though it was through atypical means.” And yet another member said, “In spite of regulation, people came to see me, brought me what I needed. Came into my home, took care of me and showed immense love.”

As was previously mentioned, Texas experienced a major ice storm during the pandemic that is known locally as Snowmageddon. It happened in mid-February of 2021. Several members of the congregation were without power for days and experienced flooding in their homes as a result of the extreme cold coupled with the loss of heat in their house. Members offered help and a place to stay warm for those who were impacted by this.

Others mentioned the concerted efforts of Project Connect, where we challenged our members to reach out to someone else every day—whether by phone, text, social media, greeting cards, or in person. One member took it upon herself to make homemade signs to place in the front yard of other members near their front door. It was a greeting card converted to a yard sign expressing a message of love and appreciation.

Four members did not give a response to the question and two members stated explicitly that they did not see God at work among his people during this time. One of these two members indicated that the way this person felt about the “shutdown” of congregational meetings made it hard for this person to see God at work in any of this. The other member simply said, “I have not seen God-moving experiences. Having the emerge celebration was a great start.” The only comment another person made was also about the EMERGE weekend. “The emerge excitement and joy of coming back together was such a happy feeling and it felt like there was an overwhelming response, especially for the emerge weekend. I felt such true happiness to be able to hug people and be hugged without feeling guilty.” If pressed to say more, perhaps this person

might have offered additional ways that God was seen at work in his people before the emerge weekend, but these two responses suggest that neither member saw God at work among his people during the pandemic; they only saw God at work in ending the pandemic experience for the congregation.

The other primary response was the way God has been at work in the pandemic experience to awaken God's people to their need to seek and serve him with all their heart. Ten members mentioned this in their response. One person called the entire thing a God-story that has resulted in renewal of faith and commitments to Christ and the things of God. As one member put it, "God has been at work in our lives by causing us to trust in him. When things go good, people tend to rely less on God."

Another member commented about how this experience pushed us to be more in charge of our growth. The pandemic gave us an opportunity to reevaluate our lives and priorities and make better choices based on the will of God for our lives instead of simply embracing some of the meaningless pursuits of our culture. And a few members responded by pointing to how this has opened our eyes to just how important our relationships with one another are. We needed to rediscover the importance of interaction for prayer, instruction and encouragement in the Word, listening to one another's stories, laughing and crying together, spending time together to affirm one another's worth, and all the other beneficial things that can only be realized when we come together as the people of God.

Someone observed in the youth that once we came back together, "God had used COVID in our young people to loosen their tongues and move them to engage in levels they didn't do before the pandemic."

There were several references to learning how to do important things in new ways—serving others, maintaining contact and relationships, online Bible classes and worship, new protocols in ministries, and creative ways to keep children engaged in the Word of God.

Two members mentioned the development of new relationships as they were compelled to get out of their usual comfortable circle to reach out to help and encourage others. Without the pandemic, they would not have gotten to know these people. And two additional members spoke of the way God was at work to deepen and strengthen some of their relationships with other members during the time of the pandemic.

Two members mentioned the work of God to prune the branches and separate the wheat from the chaff. This is a hard concept for us to embrace. We want everyone to stick around. God wants good fruit.

Finally, there was only one mention of the elders in this section. One member said, “God granted amazing wisdom and perseverance to our elders in trying to judge what to do next. Analyzing scientific data is not usually in the job description for elders. God helped them. Emerge weekend was such a great example of our elders being community leaders to bring our church back together physically.” And another member pointed to the addition of Trey Laminack to the church staff only weeks before the pandemic hit, saying, “God brought him to Woodland West at the time to find creative ways to involve our kids and provide options for them during such a uniquely difficult time experience.”

***Question Three: What have been the best things that we have done as a church during the pandemic and how have you participated in these?***

Sixteen members mentioned the implementation and improvement of technology and the creation of digital content for various demographics in the church. We initially began by creating videos for worship and Bible studies and eventually moved to streaming our worship service when some of us were ready to meet again in person. We also began using a church app to communicate with the church and make it easier for everyone to stay informed and connected. Even though many members had already responded that online worship simply cannot replace in-person worship, several commented how this has been a great blessing to them. One mentioned, “I have taken advantage of this to worship with my dad who is in a nursing home who has not been able to participate in church in almost 8 years. That is honestly the best outcome to me, and he loves our time together of worship.” Another indicated how great it is to worship online without all of the distractions that come with being in the room with everyone else. Others noted how this allows our shut ins to join us again. And finally, online prayer Zoom meetings as well as the Bible studies were greatly appreciated as a way to let us stay engaged with one another in these important community practices while we were unable to meet together in person.

Ten members mentioned the EMERGE weekend celebration and/or the community block party because of the excitement, enthusiasm and crowds that these events generated.

Most of the responses varied widely on the basis of what that member participated in: serving at Hearts and Hands, the college and young adult ministry, online and in-person children’s ministry activities like drive-in Cookies with Claus, Project Connect, regular phone calls, small group Bible studies and support groups, making sure everyone had communion

supplies, food, and other daily necessities, helping the children's homes in our area, Arlington Life Shelter, partnering with Siempre Familia Iglesia de Cristo to provide clothing and food to people in their neighborhood, including the Thanksgiving meal giveaway day, and an online prayer group. In other words, the best thing that we did as a church was the best thing that these members did with the church. But most of these responses were centered in the same themes as question #2. The best things we did were all the things we did to meet needs, and to increase our connection with one another through personal interactions that we pursued on our own time.

One person felt that the best thing we did was raise "money awareness for mission work and continue to plan for upgrade and updating at the church building."

Countering the feeling of several members in response to question #1, several members observed the church leaders making a concerted effort to care for the members of the church. "I saw the leadership care about our church body, . . . I saw them being led by faith and science of when to open back up." One person mentioned how the weekly phone call from one of the elders got him/her through the experience. Another member shared that the best thing we did was the leadership asking the church for input about worship, Bible study and other events in determining when the church members were ready for coming together again. Another member commented on how "the shepherds never stopped reminding us to look for something to do for others."

And countering the feeling that several members indicated in response to question #1 that the church has become more divided, several members spoke of how we "continued to love and support and encourage each other. We have not let it break us apart even through different opinions. We have kept our unity and even strengthened our unity. We have a stronger bond now than what we had before."

This affirmation and appreciation for the congregational leaders was offset by one member who commented that “leadership has cowered and waited to see which way the wind was blowing to make decisions.” This person was likely one of the members who had indicated that the decision for a temporary cancellation of in-person worship had been the hardest part for them.

Four members did not answer this question and an additional member’s entire response was that he/she did not participate in any of the efforts during the pandemic. There is simply no way to know why these members either did not answer or did not do the things the shepherds asked them to do. Another member indicated that he/she was not able to participate because he/she was taking care of a parent during the pandemic.

One member simply took a pass on the question to offer an unsolicited observation. “I really think that during this time more emphasis should have been placed on the teaching of placing God foremost in our life and not so much about the building up of physical relationships and trying to continue with entertaining activities.” This person felt that there was an emphasis on trying to get things back to normal, to the way things were before the pandemic, instead of challenging the church to change and make God’s kingdom our highest priority, rather than our entertainment.

This perspective was countered by the members who said one of the best things we did was ask people to be and live differently instead of simply trying to return to the old normal. As one person put it, “The emphasis on emerging better, not the same.” This same observation was made by another member who said, “The best thing we have done was focusing on being different and not falling back into old habits. Being intentional about sharing meals and bible

studies at home and being involved in new ministries. New focus on personal connections. Also, personal quiet time and study.”

***Question Four: As you reflect on everything that has happened in the past 2 years, if you are being completely honest, what has been your biggest fear for what might happen to the church in America, and Woodland West in particular?***

The vast majority of the members responded that their greatest fear is the decline and demise of the church—both for Woodland West as a congregation and for the church in America. Many members expressed concerns that people will not return, that people will choose the convenience of online worship, that faith will grow cold, that commitments will wane, and Christians will find something else to do with their lives instead of seeking the Lord. Many of the prevailing ideas shared centered around concepts of convenience, complacency, lack of commitment, and the loss of community.

The second most common response was a fear that the tensions, anger, frustrations, hatred and hostilities of American politics and culture either already has or will increasingly spill over into the hearts and lives of Christians so that this spirit of animosity infects and divides the church. Ten members gave this as their response. One person put it simply, “My fear is that we will respond to what is going on in the world in the same way the world responds.” The fear is that people will see mean and ugly behavior by Christians and want nothing to do with Jesus and his church.

Another member believed this is already happening: “I fear the church as a whole, and Woodland West too, is becoming too political on all sides of the parties. I have been shocked and surprised how brothers and sisters have used their voices to break the hearts of other members.”

Echoing this sentiment, another person expressed this fear by saying, “I also feel people have been so bullied by others’ political views they prefer to stay away.”

Interestingly, five members said that there is no fear and that there should be no fear. One commented that when Jesus returns, he is going to say, “Oh ye of little faith” regarding the pandemic experience. Perhaps it was the term “fear” in this question that triggered these responses. What might have been the responses if the question had been phrased as “What is your biggest concern?” There was a pronounced and unbreakable dichotomy of fear versus faith for several of our members that appears to have shaped their responses to several of the questions. To be sure, our faith is to trump our fear. Our confidence is in the Lord. But there will be eventual outcomes from the pandemic experience. What negative outcome are you sensing is a probable or strong possibility, but you pray it will not come about?

Several members spoke of fears that go beyond the pandemic and were more centered in what they perceive of as drift in the church of today. “My biggest fear for the church is that we are conforming to the ways of the world so that we can become more popular in the community and among other religious bodies. We are to remain separate from the ways of the world. Paul taught us that we are to live in the world but not conform to the world. My biggest fear, not only in the pandemic, but life in general, is that the church that Jesus built is not a priority among us.”

Speaking of politics and government, the biggest surprise response to this question was a stated fear of the invasion of American government into the life and faith of the church. There is a fear of the church being censored, that the government will attempt to control and restrict what the church can or cannot do, that we might lose our first amendment protection to worship without government interference, or that the government would simply compel every religious group to disband and cease from its efforts and force every church to go underground. Seven



members gave this as their response. While this is a minority, this was the third most prevalent response and accounted for 12 percent of the responses.

Finally, one person feared that “we will never go back to normal due to fear of being near other people,” while another person feared that we would simply return to way things were done before and drop all of the innovations and new skills that we learned during the pandemic, and stop trying to improve in these areas, including doing big events like the block party for community outreach.

***Question Five: If the challenges and difficulties of the pandemic experience transform just one thing in the life of this church for our good, what do you hope this one thing is? Or, to put it another way, how would you complete this statement? “I hope the pandemic experience causes us to \_\_\_\_\_.”***

Most of the responses to this question can be broken down into two overlapping categories. Over and against the responses of fear for what might happen to the church as a result of the pandemic experience, 25 members responded that they hope that the pandemic experience causes us to seek the Lord with all our heart, to make the things of God the focus of our lives, to put our faith and trust completely in the Lord in all things, so that we draw closer to God and come to know him better and walk in his ways. One person put it this way, “I hope this experience causes me to be different than I was. The pandemic has created an opportunity to change the course of our lives. We can either seize the opportunity or let it pass. Going back to our old habits is to miss an opportunity to radically change our relationship with God and His people and our impact on the world.”

Members used words like called, strong, dedicated, obligated, intentional, sincere, and selfless. One member said, “I hope the pandemic experience causes us to be as courageous as the 1<sup>st</sup> century church when facing danger.” Because, as another member responded, “The pandemic has taught us that faith occurs outside the walls of the building and not just when we come together.”

An additional 24 members responded that they hope the pandemic experience causes us to be fully devoted to the fellowship of Christ in the church. As one member put it, “I hope the pandemic experience will open our eyes to just how important the church really is—meeting together, encouraging one another, serving together, being the light of the world, making disciples, and all the rest.” Members said that we need to set aside all the mindless and empty distractions of modern life and give our time and energy to building up the body of Christ.

Members are hoping that we will truly emerge better, stronger, together. Living for God means that we live for one another and not just for ourselves. We need to value and covet this fellowship we call the Woodland West church so deeply that nothing will keep us away. We need to see this fellowship as a precious gift from God and appreciate one another more. One person hopes that we will become more engaged in relationships in which we are real, vulnerable, accountable, and genuine. Members hope that the pandemic wakes us up to a new realization of how important it is for every member to do their part to help the church be everything that God wants us to be as his family.

We need to be devoted to coming together for worship, Bible study, prayer, and encouragement. And we need to be devoted to doing good deeds for the sake of others. We need to do this both individually and entirely on our own, and we need to do this collectively as the body of Christ. Our members hope that the pandemic experience ignites a desire within us to

serve one another and our community. Other members expressed it this way: We need to be more involved. We need to give back and not just come to receive. We need to invest in the fellowship. We need to keep reaching out to our members to help everyone stay connected. We need to value our community as a church as well as our community where the church lives to be light and salt by acts of service and kindness.

Flowing out of these two responses were the voices of nine members who said they hope the pandemic experience causes us to become a fellowship that is constantly reaching out to serve and share the Gospel of Jesus with our local community and around the world. They hope that we will be on fire for the Lord and GO out to talk with those who live around us about to tell them about Jesus and invite them to join us in seeking and serving the Lord.

Finally, there were three members that expressed the specific hope that the pandemic experience will cause us to be more united. Another member added the hope that we will “learn to love and forgive each other in a way that is different from the world.” With everything that happened in 2020 and 2021, the church needs to be a light of hope that God’s redemption and reconciliation that bring healing, peace, and harmony, can and will transform our community to be one family in Christ when we walk in his ways.

***Question Six: During the past 2 years of the pandemic, what were the most meaningful experiences for you both in giving encouragement to others and in receiving encouragement from others?***

32 members answered this question by speaking of the different ways they received encouragement during the pandemic: From greeting cards and notes in the mail to texts, phone calls, video calls, drive by visits, front porch visits, and small gatherings of friends and members

to simply be together. Others mentioned small gatherings for the purpose of Bible study or prayer, as well as time to encourage each other in conversation. Tangible and meaningful interaction was the key to all these moments of encouragement. Whether one-on-one or in a small group, meaningful human interaction took place that encouraged those who gave and received.

16 members mentioned various ways they were served or had the opportunity to serve others. Things like picking up groceries, providing or receiving a meal, or checking in on someone who was sick were mentioned the most. Members were able to open their home during the snowstorm to those who had lost power. Others made or received items that were handmade. One member mentioned how her/his family does not normally ask for help, but when they did, they received an amazing response from their Woodland West church family. Several of the responses were spoken in the context of sickness or the loss of loved ones.

There were several affirmations of the church leaders in the responses. One member commented on the wonderful job of clear communication to the congregation regarding decisions and instructions. Two members mentioned receiving calls from the shepherds, and one of them said that the “elders calling weekly to check on us made me realize I need to be more purposeful in reaching out and encouraging others to what the Spirit puts on my heart.” One member responded that it was encouraging for someone to share they did not agree with a course of action decided by the leadership team, but then immediately indicate that they would support the leaders and abide by the decision.

Curiously, eight members either did not give a response at all or gave responses that did not speak to the question. And one member lamented that he/she had “not felt any meaningful experiences of being encouraged, which has made me feel disillusioned with the church.” This

statement of feeling ignored and overlooked stands in stark contrast to someone who responded, “I had significant health challenges in 2020, and I was blown away at the many ways my brothers and sisters stepped in to serve me and my family, in both physical ways and emotional support. I will never forget it.”

This drastic difference in experience may be the result of something rather simple and inevitable. Those whose lives appeared to be otherwise normal and healthy were perhaps more likely to have felt isolated and neglected compared to those whose struggles were open and publicly known. People were reaching out and responding to those who were going through a crisis. On the other hand, people who seemed to be doing well may have unfortunately and unintentionally been ignored.

The biggest emphasis in all the responses was the personal aspect of the interactions. People were seen. Time was given to them. Their needs were addressed. Emotional support was given. And in all these things, both those giving and receiving were encouraged in meaningful ways.

***Question Seven: What will it take to motivate you to choose to disrupt and rearrange your life again in order to pursue renewal with your church family and to rebuild what has been lost and destroyed?***

The responses to this question were more varied than any of the others. There was no consensus response. At the outset it is interesting to note that while nearly everyone gave a response to the question, many of the responses did not actually answer the question. Instead of answering the question of “What will it take to motivate you?” several members responded by engaging with the terminology of renewal and rebuilding. One member responded beautifully, “I

think God is calling us to build anew, to start over in so many ways, to be different than we were. I think we are being called to a renewal, not a rebuilding. I think this is a God-given, once in a lifetime opportunity to let God reshape our spiritual and physical lives.” But this answer completely avoided the question, “What will it take *to motivate you* to rearrange your life and join God in this renewal?”

One member responded by saying, “Open the doors and let us decide to take the risk to come to worship or not. I think many of us would want to take that risk. So give us that opportunity.” This was the end of January of 2022. We resumed in-person worship in June 2021. This response was a reminder of how our concept of time and our memories throughout these two years got so fuzzy and confused because of the pandemic.

Another member commented, “I don’t see the pandemic as a disruption.” Another asked, “What has been lost?” Most of the members had responded to the earlier questions of the survey with frequent responses about the loss of fellowship and the feeling of disconnect and discouragement that came from this loss, and even the disappointment that this loss had taken place. Yet here was a member posing the question, “What has been lost?”

Without indicating what had compelled them to take action, 9 members responded that they are already motivated and doing things to pursue renewal as we continue to emerge and move forward. This was actually the highest percentage of responses. Perhaps they needed the question to be, “What will motivate you OR what has already motivated you?”

Six members responded by simply stating what they need to do, not about what will motivate them to do it. These members spoke of the need to schedule and make time to reconnect with people, to reach to their brothers and sisters, to reach out to those who do not know Jesus, to reconnect to the personal aspect of fellowship, and build relationships. Some spoke of their need

to get out of their comfort zone. Others focused on things like prayer and more time for personal reflection and self-evaluation, and the need for listening to God and responding to the nudging of the Holy Spirit.

But there was nothing in these responses that engaged with the question of what it will take to motivate you to do any of these things. These responses merely affirmed the need to be motivated and the need to choose to pursue God's will and work in our lives.

On the other hand, there were a number of members who fully engaged with the question. One person responded simply, "When I am personally asked." Another said, "I need to change my mindset." And yet another, "I have to stop allowing Satan to speak louder than God."

A couple of responses spoke to the need for appreciation and affirmation. One member responded, "In order to be motivated, I need to feel like I matter at church, not like I am being taken for granted." Perhaps speaking out of the same feeling, another member said that he/she needed the church to place importance on all members equally. Was this person also looking to be valued and affirmed, or was there something else behind this statement? An opportunity for a follow-up question would have been helpful.

Others simply replied, "I don't know." One added to this sentiment, "but this has given me a lot to consider."

Several members essentially said what would motivate them is a complete return to normalcy and expressed a desire for the lifting of all remaining COVID protocols and a return to things like the shepherds praying in the worship assembly with members who come forward for prayer.

A couple of members responded with a desire for direction and a vision of what we can work toward, a long-term goal with mini-attainable goals with timelines along the path, and a

clear mission to pursue. Another member pointed in this same direction with the response, “First, we need to identify what has been lost and destroyed and which of those things we even want to rebuild.” And yet another put it this way, “I need to feel like God has called us to do this.”

Others said it would take factors outside of themselves to motivate them. They said that they need to “see other examples of sacrifice,” “see new people stepping up and doing things,” congregational growth or growth within a particular demographic of the congregation, a culture change in the church, “a full light-the-fire revival” in the church, or a “growing consensus that the church is a center of America’s social, political and practical life. The core of a moral society.”

One member responded honestly, “I’m not motivated anymore by Woodland West.” This person was also looking for motivation by something outside of himself or herself. This person went on to express a desire to see a collective passion by all the members of the congregation to live out the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

Perhaps the response of another member captures the spirit of all these responses that seemingly point to forces outside of themselves. In response to the question what it will take to motivate you, this member said, “Hope that it matters. Hope that it makes a difference. Hope that God really is at work among us and within us.” Or as another member put it, “Remembering what I do does make a difference.” Without such hope, it is incredibly difficult to be motivated to do anything.



## **ASSESSMENT OF THE RESPONSES**

### **The Congregational Research Study Team's Assessment of the Congregational Responses**

The six members of the congregational research study team were tasked with a challenging request: read through the responses of the church and try to sort out what has been and is going on with our church as a result of the pandemic experience. This research team was not made up of disinterested strangers who have no significant interest in the life of this church. The team was made up of people who are fully vested in the life of this church. All the women on the team have been members of Woodland West for over 20 years. Of the three ministers, one has been here 15 years, another 7 years, and the other arrived just before the pandemic began. All of us have skin in the game. This congregation is our church family. These people matter to us; their thoughts, feelings, opinions, and perspectives matter to us; and our relationships with these people matter to us.

As we sorted through what we heard from our brothers and sisters, we did not want to hurt, harm or attack anyone in our reflections on these things. We wanted to hear the voices of our fellow members and honor their perspectives, and we wanted to discern what this tells us about how the pandemic experience has shaped our life and faith as a congregation.

The same questions that were asked of the church, we asked ourselves. Our voices were part of the chorus of responses that were given. But the responses from the congregation made it clear that at times we were neither singing the same melody nor the same words. Even though we all experienced the pandemic as followers of Christ, we did not experience the pandemic in the same way; and we did not experience God in the same way as we walked through this unusual time.

In addition to the seven questions we asked the church, the research study team asked itself an additional seven questions in an attempt to discern and reflect on the responses from the congregation. Before turning to these questions and how the team wrestled with these, it may prove to be helpful to skip ahead to the second question presented to the research team and at least touch on the emotional aspect of this research project.

### **The Emotional Component of the Research**

One of the things that became immediately apparent to the entire research study team was the emotional component of the project. This congregation research study asked people to share their thoughts and feelings about a wide range of important things that touch on their lives and faith. As a result, there was a pronounced emotional element embedded in many of the responses. The project was exploring things that matter to people, not simply on a lofty intellectual level of principle, but on the ground level of where people live their lives. These things matter to people because they value and desire these things and the joy and pleasure that they experience in these things. They believe these things to be true. They have shaped their lives around these things and poured themselves into these things. They have sacrificed for these things. They are vested relationally, emotionally, and financially. The stakes could not be any higher.

This emotional aspect of the project was intensified by the emotional toll of the pandemic experience and the heightened emotional responses to just about everything in life during the pandemic due to the increased stress this brought into our lives, both individually and collectively. The polarizing factors of the pandemic experience in America intensified our emotional responses. We were all pressed to choose a side on every issue and double down on whatever emotional response that came with that mindset.

As a result, many of us were painfully aware that in some instances, no matter what you chose to do, you were going to be criticized. For example, David Rosmarin described how when he was out for a run wearing a mask, someone yelled at him for wearing a mask. He thought about it and decided that person was right. He was running around a reservoir. He was far away from everybody. So the next day, he thought to himself, “Maybe I won’t wear my mask today.”

He describes what happened the very next day when he went for a run without a mask. “I approached a lady, I’m 20 feet away, and I smiled at her, and she angrily yelled, ‘Don’t smile at me. You’re not wearing a mask. You’re taking a chance with my life!’” Rosmarin’s conclusion: “You can’t win.”<sup>93</sup>

Rosmarin is an assistant professor of psychology in Harvard Medical School’s Department of Psychiatry and a clinician at McLean Hospital where he runs the hospital’s Spirituality and Mental Health program. His reflection and explanation about the rise in anger in America is a helpful reflection on what has been happening.

One of the ways of thinking about anger—which I find helpful from a clinical standpoint—is to conceptualize it as a secondary emotion. Fear, anger, joy, and sadness are your four primary emotions, and secondary emotions occur as a reaction to our primary emotions, rather than to the situation. If I called you up and said, “Hey, I have a million-dollar check for you to come pick up,” you’ll have a joy reaction—and maybe some fear—but an automatic emotional reaction. But with anger, it is usually a secondary reaction. I feel sad or I feel anxious and I don’t like that feeling, so I get angry at the person. [In other words, although anger is classified as a primary emotion, it’s often expressed in secondary ways.]

Take the mask example. The real core of someone telling another to put on a mask is fear. “I don’t want to die or for someone I know who is high risk to die.” “I want the coronavirus to go away.” “I don’t want my stress level to be so high.” “I want this virus to be contained.” “I want this nightmare to be over.” There’s fear; there’s sadness. But we

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<sup>93</sup> Alvin Powell, “Soothing Advice for Mad America,” *The Harvard Gazette* (August 14, 2020). [news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/08/a-closer-look-at-americas-pandemic-fueled-anger](https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/08/a-closer-look-at-americas-pandemic-fueled-anger). Accessed March 1, 2023.

skip over that. I'm feeling sad or anxious, but instead of dealing with those emotions, [I] draw a gun or yell at someone or at least make fun of them.<sup>94</sup>

Rosmarin applied the same thinking to those who were afraid that their civil liberties were being taken away in being required to wear a mask or pressured to get a COVID-19 vaccination and to parents who were afraid they would not be able to handle another year of online school. In his assessment, unfortunately, we are often more comfortable expressing anger than we are at expressing fear or anxiety. For example, instead of a parent saying, "I really don't think I can handle another year of Zoom school. Things being unclear is just driving me insane. Can you please help me?", a parent is more inclined to say with anger, "Get this problem fixed."<sup>95</sup> Rosmarin pressed further and added, "When we're aggressive, we don't have to show vulnerability to other people. If the woman who's angry at the school board were to say, 'Hey, I really can't hack this. I can't handle it,' she'd actually be showing the school board that they have power over her by showing her vulnerability. That's too scary to do, so she gets angry."<sup>96</sup>

Instead of anger, Rosmarin recommended that we allow ourselves to be vulnerable.

Returning to the example of wearing masks, he offered this.

[L]et's say you're walking down the street and somebody's not wearing a mask. You say to them, "Hey, I noticed you're not wearing a mask. Don't worry. I'm not angry. I'm not gonna yell at you. But I want to let you know that I'm high risk, or I live with someone who's high risk, or it makes me really anxious and would you mind putting on a mask?" That's a very different message, . . . And it gets a different response. The reality is that we can't really control the other person or whether they're going to wear a mask. But we're going to maximize the likelihood of their compliance by showing our vulnerability.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

The lead researcher warned the congregational research team in advance that some of the responses were both emotional and explicit. The team members were told to be prepared for some strong language that you may not agree with and that may stir up strong emotional responses within you. There was nothing in the congregational responses that would get redacted from a television program. But some of the responses were explicit in their disappointment and criticism of the decisions by our congregational leaders to temporarily suspend the worship assemblies and other gatherings of the church during the height of the pandemic as well as the COVID protocols that were a part of our initial gatherings after we came back together. As the process began, at least one member of the team reached out to the lead researcher to ask for additional prayer after this person had begun the process of reading the responses. This part of the research process felt both emotional and personal.

Once the research study team finally came together to talk through the collective impressions of the congregation's answers to the seven questions posed on the Day of Discovery, there was a strong sense of emotions in the responses—lots of hurt, pain, disappointment and frustration came through. The entire group sensed this.

At times, this pain and disappointment crossed over to contempt and criticism. For example, one person repeatedly referred to the pandemic as the scamdemic and spoke of the congregational leadership as cowering in fear.

Could it be that this was what Rosmarin described as a secondary response? For anyone who disagreed with the decision to temporarily suspend worship gatherings in response to all the uncertainties of COVID-19 and the appeals of the health community, could it be that the primary emotional response was this?

I was disappointed by the decision to temporarily suspend Bible classes and worship on campus because with all the other social restrictions that were part of the pandemic experience, I really needed the physical and social interaction with my church family to encourage and help me through this difficult time. With our world being turned upside down, I needed there to be part of my life that was entirely normal. I had hoped this space was going to be the church, but when this was taken away from me (and my family), it really hurt.

Several members of the congregation expressed thoughts like this. Could it be that those who expressed contempt for congregational leaders felt these same emotions, but instead of expressing these emotions they moved on to the secondary responses of anger or ridicule?

Without the benefit of asking follow-up questions to dig deeper and clarify such responses, the research study team was left to wrestle with the responses as they were given, while reflecting and wondering about what we needed to hear and discern in these responses that so clearly were loaded with all the emotions we felt during the pandemic.

The heavy emotional aspect of this project will be addressed again below, as this was one of the specific questions the research study team asked itself as it wrestled with the responses of the congregation. What follows below are the assessment questions that the congregational research study team attempted to answer on the basis of the congregational responses to the Day of Discovery.

### **Congregational Research Study Team Question One:**

**What are the prevailing themes or patterns (good, bad or indifferent)  
that emerged from the congregational survey as a whole?**

The prevailing theme of the congregational responses was the huge impact the pandemic has had on fellowship and relationships. Instead of this time being a detrimental setback, the temporary time of suspending all our meetings for worship, Bible study, fellowship, ministry,

and emotional support has resulted in a greater awareness of the importance of community in the life of the congregation. Instead of sinking into a self-pitying funk, the congregation accepted the challenge of the church's leadership to embrace this unique opportunity to explore and discover the meaning and purpose of being the body of Christ in new ways that helped us to grow deeper in Christ.

Members pointed to the absence of the usual acts of affirmation and affection conveyed through physical touch in the form of hugs and handshakes, the feeling of isolation, the disruption of relationships, and the disconnection that came from losing our routines of fellowship, faith and worship in community together as a congregation. These losses were replaced by the mass of people who took it upon themselves to go out and do something for or with someone, to make phone calls, to deliver needed food, medicine and supplies, or simply to deliver some encouragement through conversation.

The biggest fear that participants expressed is that people won't come back after the pandemic is over and the congregation will shrink in size. This fear resulted in some interesting concerns about the use of technology once the pandemic is over.

The use of technology during the time that we did not meet as a church for worship and Bible study was a major shift for the congregation. Members indicated that while the use of technology was good and incredibly beneficial during the pandemic, video streaming and social media cannot duplicate or replace the church gathered. Online worship, Bible study and social interaction simply is not the same. There is no comparison. It does not have the personal and communal quality that can only be fully experienced and felt when we are physically together.

Even so, many expressed concerns that the convenience factor and conditioning to online worship will keep people away in the future. They feared that technology may have made things

too easy for people and that they will settle for online worship instead of meeting with the church. This concern about the future was fascinating. Everyone said the use of technology simply is not the same. It cannot replace the physical gathering of God's people. They could not wait for the church to come together again. Yet they feared that this is not a universal feeling. There is a fear that those who have not yet returned will never return.

On one hand, it feels like there is a flaw in the logic here. Watching worship online is not about relationships. If online worship cannot replace what everyone was missing during the pandemic, then it poses no threat to people returning to worship with the church. The real threat and concern are that people have simply lost their commitment to belonging to the body of Christ in the context of a local church. New habits and patterns of life, and even new priorities, may have displaced their commitment to living and serving in community with the church.

The team observed that this concern about technology displacing meeting with the church is not a new phenomenon. Many of our members expressed strong concerns that some people will not come back because of the convenience of online worship, but tons of churches have broadcast their worship for a very long time as a way to grow their church, not shrink it. Even in normal times there is a healthy use of technology for the sake of the sick, shut-in, and those who are traveling, and people who do not yet know the Lord. Churches have been broadcasting on television and radio and using the Internet to push out the Gospel for decades. These technologies are tools to both reach new people and to minister to members who are unable to meet with the church on any given day. The story of the member who has been worshiping with his father in a nursing home is an example of this. Seen in this light, live streaming worship online is not a dangerous threat to people coming back. It is simply a resource that is provided for those who cannot attend worship in person.



If, however, someone is not seeking relationships and meaningful fellowship, someone is not seeking to serve Christ as part of a local church community, for them this is a nonfactor. For someone who is able to meet with the church but who chooses to stay home and worship online, this is not so much about the convenience of technology as it is about this person's relationships within the congregation. Having been away for so long may have caused them to feel disconnected, or it may have heightened the already prevailing lack of strong relationships with other members of the congregation that predates the pandemic.

Another prevailing theme was the pain, fear, anxiety and uncertainty about what is the best path forward—as well as some second guessing about what would have been a better path through the brief stay at home orders given by the government. The team noted the strong emotional component to the responses and observed that people are obviously hurting. You can sense this in the answers. In addition to the hurt, there is frustration. Several responses essentially ignored the question to simply express frustration, resentment and anger.

Some of the specific hurts came through the strong expression of opinions during the pandemic. There has been a wide spectrum of conflicting views and beliefs around COVID-19 and how our society and churches should have responded to the spread of the virus. This includes everything from voluntary and mandatory isolation, COVID-19 shots, wearing of masks, social distancing, and who should be making the decisions based on what data. The medical and epidemiological conversation quickly became politicized. Some of our members joined in the fray and strongly expressed their opinions about how things ought to be. This resulted in additional emotional wounds that resulted in relational wounds as well.

Others expressed their hurt, pain and anxiety for the way the pandemic-induced isolation and greatly reduced social interaction impacted youth and children. Some expressed their pain

and disappointment in the sustained attendance drop after the church resumed meeting together for worship and Bible study; they saw other members out and about on the town, but not at worship.

Another theme was the impact COVID had on ministries and plans. We began the year 2020 with so many strong plans to stretch ourselves and GO as part of our Know, Grow, Go initiative, and ended up having to suspend most of these plans indefinitely.

There was some reflection on what the church means without being so dependent on the leaders to do the majority of the work. The work of the church is the work of the church, not just the few.

There were also several themes that surprised the research study team. The biggest surprise was the number of respondents who expressed their fears and concerns for how government involvement and pressure is threatening the church and its future. Nobody on the team had anticipated this. Given the exaggerated nature of the political battles that took place during 2020 and 2021 and the heightened intensity of the rhetoric around these things, this should not have surprised us. Members of our congregation who are passionate about American politics and keep their fingers on the pulse of the ongoing debates in our nation will of course be mindful of the possible implications of precedents that occurred during the pandemic, as well as legislation or court decisions that aim to curb religious freedoms and privileges in our nation.

The congregational research study team was also surprised how many of the responses to this initial question focused on COVID protocols when we came back together as a church to meet in person. This initial question was intended to be an easy first question to get everyone talking. It worked. And many of our members talked about what had been incessantly talked about in the news and social media for the past two years: COVID-19 protocols.

A final theme was probably a couple of items attached to each other. Disagreement with church leadership about the proper response to the pandemic, especially the decision to suspend meeting as a church for a while, and the implementation of COVID protocols when we came back together, coupled with the loss of congregational interaction during the temporary suspension of all the church's regular meeting schedule made a few respondents feel like the shepherds took a step back from shepherding the flock during this time. For at least a few members there was a lingering disappointment and a feeling of disconnect with the leadership team. This was not a widely shared perspective and there were other members who expressed their gratitude and appreciation for the diligent efforts of church leadership.

There can be no doubt that at some point during this time there was a very real sense of leadership fatigue on the part of the shepherding group. The additional stress of navigating through uncharted territory from the very beginning of the pandemic experience was relentless. In addition to wrestling with all the data and recommendations that was pouring in from the medical community, the congregational leadership team was seeking to know and do the will of God and to discern what is best for the welfare of the congregation, both for individual members and the collective whole. In the same way that so many of us were feeling an additional layer of pandemic stress as a result of the absolute disruption of our routines and relationships, not to mention the extreme social and political turmoil in our nation, these same kinds of pressures were weighing on the minds of our shepherds—at work, at home and in their interactions with the members of the Woodland West congregation.

## **Congregational Research Study Team Question Two:**

**What are the prevailing emotional responses and feelings that were evoked by the questions of the congregational survey? Why do you think this happened?**

There were strong emotional responses by members of the congregation, both positive and negative, about all the COVID protocols that were implemented during the height of the pandemic and the occasional surges in cases, beginning with the decision to suspend all in-person meetings of the church. We are emotional beings, so this is to be expected. There is always an emotional component.

The emotional categories were wide and ranging. Members felt loved and validated, disappointed, frustrated, fearful, angry, encouraged, grateful and thankful. People were encouraged and thankful for those who reached out to them and thankful for opportunities to serve other people, the implementation of technology, the good deeds and attitudes that they saw in others, Project Connect, the EMERGE and big block party celebrations, and the efforts to reach outside and beyond our congregation in all these efforts.

Some members were relieved and thankful by the cautious approach of congregational leadership; others disagreed and felt strong negative emotions and disappointment. We all have personal beliefs and opinions about what is best for us. We are nurturers and we take care of our own. And when decisions are made that either support or diverge from what we believe will be best for us, we tend to respond accordingly.

Even so, the team was not expecting to hear the strong feelings of disappointment in church leadership that went beyond stating disagreement to labeling the decisions as fear based. In this same vein, we were not expecting people to state that the hardest part of the pandemic experience for them was being compliant with the temporary COVID protocols once we came

back together. For at least some of our members, the joy of being together was significantly dampened, if not completely overwhelmed, by the requirement to wear a mask.

In wrestling with why the responses were so emotional and at times seemingly harsh and critical, one team member wondered that perhaps we did not talk enough about the situation while we were going through it. On the other hand, several of us felt like we talked about it too much. The protocols were adjusted several times in response to the ebb and flow of the COVID cases in the Metroplex. It was information overload that only added to the frustration of the experience.

Another team member wondered if we might have been unintentionally filtering the world through our political lens. “Does whatever information I am hearing match my political beliefs or affiliation?” We may not even be aware of it. We believe that our convictions are rooted first and foremost in the truth and in the will of God, but how much of our thinking has been informed and influenced by whatever media source we are consuming on a daily or weekly basis in the form of news channels, websites, podcasts, and conversations with family and friends?

Listening exclusively to media sources that echo and affirm our convictions and attitudes can prevent us from thinking as clearly and openly as we should. We struggle to hear and consider the other side with a sense of humility and compassion. What is God calling us to for the sake of others? We are always to be humble and gentle, but in the overwhelming angst and frustrations of the pandemic, we did not always live up to our best beliefs.

In the midst of these widely differing emotional responses to the same things, the response that especially surprised the research team was a stated fear by several members of the government attempting to take control and limit the freedom of churches in America.

Finally, since this was our first congregational gathering of this kind in over two years, the research team wondered if perhaps some of our members might have come into the activity with a mindset that this was an opportunity to provide feedback to the congregational leaders that they had been keeping to themselves for a long time. Perhaps there were a lot of thoughts and feelings that had been building up during the past 20 months. This might have been a moment of release for these pent-up emotions and frustrations.

**Congregational Research Study Team Question Three:**

**Based on this, how do you sense that the pandemic experience  
has shaped us as a congregation, for better or worse?**

**What are the various and nuanced ways that it has shaped us?**

The consensus of the team was that the congregation has sensed that God has been at work in the pandemic experience for our good. There are many ways that we have been shaped for the better. The pandemic shaped us to take a personal initiative in making a deliberate effort to connect with the larger body of Christ. It has helped more of our members recognize their own responsibility to find a way to serve without someone calling them into a program. Just do it. Take the initiative.

This is a modern challenge. We are, as a nation, too busy. This results in fatigue and neglect of important aspects of our lives. We are so tired and stressed from our busyness, we are demotivated from doing what we know is necessary and best. The pandemic gave many of us an opportunity to slow down and give time for self-reflection. This reawakened our awareness of the importance of church as community and the irreplaceable nature of appropriate touches of affirmation. The obvious need for connection compelled all of us to do our own part in doing

whatever was necessary to stay connected with each other. People found ways to be church, reevaluate what we are doing for people, and how we can be better. It helped us to think about where we are in our relationship with God as well as how we can motivate others and staying connected. People learned to connect or did so in ways they never had before. Hopefully, we will maintain the effort at a personal level so that it has a community wide impact on the congregation. The team also sensed that people are ready to move forward and serve with a renewed sense of the vision and goals that have and will be set before us. Communication will be vital in this. Finally, the team sensed from the congregational survey that the pandemic caused us to pursue technology as a useful tool and resource in ways that we had been neglecting.

Even so, there were a few things that may have shaped us for the worse. The congregational research team heard a lot of pain in people who were hurt by other members, what others said from a political viewpoint about wearing masks, vaccines, and other aspects of the pandemic. America was divided, polarized, and angry resulting in spiteful and demeaning rhetoric. Flowing out of this, our members shared that within the church family things were said and done that were hurtful and divisive. These wounds may not have been caused intentionally, but it happened, nevertheless. The team suspects this is one of the reasons some of our members have not yet returned to Woodland West.

Along these same lines, for at least a few of our members, there is an undercurrent of disconnect from the congregation and leadership. Perhaps before the pandemic these members would have felt good toward leadership, but the pandemic has shaped these members to now feel disconnected. Without data before the pandemic, this is simply a hypothesis. Either way, there now appears to be a disconnect of sorts. Even though this was a minority response, it provides an

opportunity for open and honest conversations that aim to help our leaders and members to lean into one another in order to affirm our relationship as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Most of our members trusted our leaders and acted on their instructions to GO and connect. Strangely, several of those who were critical of the leadership reported that they embraced the call to GO. They pursued these opportunities vigorously. But instead of acknowledging that the congregational leadership recognized and affirmed the importance of this interaction and service, a couple of those who criticized church leadership pointed to their efforts to stay connected with the body of Christ as a sort of rebellious and defiant activity of resistance.

The leaders never told our members to stay away from each other. Quite the opposite, the leaders repeatedly encouraged everyone to GO and find ways to serve others and stay connected with the body of Christ even while observing the protocols being urged by the health community. This is reminiscent of Paul's observations in Philippians 1:15-18 that some people were preaching Christ out of bad motivations. Paul was just glad Christ was being proclaimed. So it is in this matter; whether members wanted to support the appeal of the congregational leaders to pursue interaction, connections, encouragement, support, Bible study, service and more, or they participated in these activities in a spirit of defiance, what matters most is that people were being blessed by the efforts.



#### **Congregational Research Study Team Question Four:**

**In what significant ways did the congregation see God at work among us? And what ways do you believe or suspect that God has been at work among us that were unnamed? That is, in what ways may we all have simply taken it for granted that God has been at work among us, but nobody bothered to name it?**

The research team recognized two primary themes for how members saw God at work among us. First, God moved us to action. Our members saw God causing us to do something. Our GO in 2020 was in a very different way than we anticipated, but we did not just sit at home and wait for the pandemic to be over. We still went. God was at work in people taking personal ownership of doing something of their own volition.

As emphasized in question 3 above, one of the ways the congregation saw God at work among us was in causing us to rediscover the importance of relationships. The personal interaction of the church is of utmost importance. The church got to be reminded of this through this experience. God opened our eyes to the realization that we were created and designed for relationship. And God moved us to go and do something about it, so much so that new relationships were forged during this time of “social isolation.” This counterintuitive result is evidence that God was at work in this.

Second, God was also at work in this to draw us back or closer to God. The slowdown of the pandemic, along with all the uncertainties of the pandemic, caused us to think more deeply about life, faith, and God. It brought us back to a posture of relying on God and a desire to seek God’s kingdom. Our members realized that we would not have survived through the pandemic without God at work among us.

Reflecting on these two themes, one of the research team members observed, “Our faith has been tested.” It was interesting that no one named this in any of the responses from the Day of Discovery. This idea was affirmed in the oral reading to the congregation before they were asked question five. But there was no mention of God testing us as his people in the language of James 1:2-4 or other such passages in any of the responses of the day. Many of the responses, however, pointed to the outcome of the testing of our faith. It has resulted in endurance and perseverance. Our members recognized how God has brought us through this long and difficult season.

Turning this thought around, a few of our members indicated their belief that God was at work in this experience not only to renew us and draw us near to him, but also to prune the vine and remove the chaff from the wheat. This aspect of God’s testing his people is heavy and difficult for us. We do not like to think or talk this way. We want everyone to seek and serve the Lord.

As an example of how difficult it is for us to think this way, besides these two responses that named this phenomenon, all of the other responses that suggested why some members have not yet returned to meeting with the church pointed to anything and everything else as the reason why they have not returned—meeting online lasted too long, meeting online is now too convenient, COVID protocols kept people away, and divisive comments were made on social media.

The youth minister and youth parents saw God at work in the youth. The youth are now engaging in conversations and being more open than ever before. They are willingly sharing and exploring their doubts, questions, and reflections. This has created opportunities for our adult members to interact with them more deeply about questions that matter.

Finally, the celebration events of the EMERGE weekend and the big block party were seen as both God moving us to do something and as God drawing us back to him.

### **Congregational Research Study Team Question Five:**

**Based on the responses, how do you sense that the faith and hope of the congregation for our future has been shaped? In what ways do you sense the responses suggest it has been beneficial to us and in what ways to you sense it may have dampened or discouraged our faith and hope? Why do you think this happened?**

The research team really wrestled with how to assess the congregation's responses as it relates to our future. Our congregation's response to the pandemic has been both good and bad. So, our future has potentially been shaped for either good or bad, depending on the choices we will be making, both individually and collectively, as we move forward.

In some ways it is like the story of the Exodus. Will we put our faith and trust in the Lord that he is with us and has great things planned for us if we will but follow where he leads us into our future and join with the Lord in doing whatever he wants us to do in his power and strength? Unfortunately, in the Exodus story, the promise of God to give the Israelites a better life in Canaan was set aside by the negative, unfavorable report of the ten spies who did not believe this was possible (Numbers 13:31-33). Upon hearing their report, the Israelites wanted to mount a *coup d'état* and appoint a new leader who would take them back to the comfort and security of their former life in Egypt. They wanted the stable predictability of their normal "safe" life, even if it was in the bondage of slavery. The language of Numbers 14:1-4 is a bit shocking in stating that the entire community wanted to do this.

That night all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, "If

only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?" And they said to each other, "We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt" (NIV).

This story, of course, is set against the backdrop of the constant grumbling of the community all along the way. Perhaps no complaint was more preposterous than the one recorded in Exodus 16:3: "The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death" (NIV). Even after the Lord provided manna from heaven, the complaining continued. "The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!'" (Numbers 11:4-6 NIV).

The long journey to the Promised Land felt less than promising. It had sapped the Israelites of their initial joy over leaving Egypt as a free people. And now, the prospect of invading the cities of Canaan seemed daunting and impossible. There was no hope for this future. It was easier to give in to fear, despair, and anxiety than it was to press forward into a promised future that was so radically different, uncertain and unknown to them. Interestingly, fear caused them to want things to return to normal, not to walk through the adventure of new things in pursuit of a better life by faith in the God who had led them out of their old normal.

While we are here, in this story, in the wilderness, waiting and wandering—something that undoubtedly felt a lot like our pandemic experience of waiting and wondering—there was a face covering that featured prominently in this story in Exodus 34:29-35. The people were

freaked out by the appearance of Moses. It made them uncomfortable to see the glory of God radiating from his face. They were afraid to come close to Moses, so they asked him to cover his face. Moses did not need to cover his face. There was no risk of harm that might come to the people by being in his presence while his face glowed. Nevertheless, for the sake of the people, Moses covered his face with a veil. The facial covering was not for Moses; it was entirely for them.

Returning to the larger story of the Exodus, it was an experience filled with anxiety. It was an experience that was swimming in death. It was an experience packed with political tension. It was an experience full of uncertainties. When will the pillar of cloud or fire move again? How long will we camp here? Where will we find water at the next campsite? When will we eat meat again? It was an experience full of criticisms and complaints directed at God's chosen leader who was doing exactly what God had told him to do. And it was an experience of new things. Manna from heaven started with the exodus. The word manna literally means, "What is it?" It was a brand-new experience, but it was a temporary experience that God used both to test and teach his people.

As Moses explained in Deuteronomy 8:2-3:

Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD (NIV).

So, ultimately the Exodus story was an experience of God: the plagues, the crossing through the Red Sea, the deliverance from Pharaoh's army and every other army that came against the people, the manna, the quail, the water flowing from rock, pillar of fire by night and

the pillar of cloud by day, the deliverance from bondage and the journey to the Promised Land was all about experiencing God. The question was simply whether the people experienced God, or they experienced doubt, fear and grumbling.

No one named this story as our story in the congregational research, but a few of our members expressed this kind of hope both for our congregation and the larger church. They hoped that we, like God's people long ago, will have been shaped by the experience of the pandemic to have greater faith in the Lord, to seek him with all of heart, and give ourselves fully to do his will with our lives and join him in his work of redemption in our age.

Like some of the Israelites in the Exodus story, several members of the research team sensed that our members were deeply discouraged by the pandemic. It seemed like faith and hope had both taken a significant hit. There was this sense of "Oh no, what's going to happen now?" For those members, hope for the future is a little shaky. Their faith appears to be lessened by the pandemic, not increased.

Based on the responses, it felt like several of our members had moved into a cautious mindset and were kind of teetering and wondering, "Do I stay or not? I got hurt and I'm not sure what I am going to do." For example, one member had put it quite simply, "The trouble with me is that I'm not motivated anymore by Woodland West." As a result of these kind of statements that were sprinkled into the congregational responses, the team felt like there were more negative responses than positive responses.

On the other hand, there were many responses that indicated we have learned a lot through the pandemic experience. We can take these things we have gone through and build on them. There has been growth through this. All of this lends itself to hope for the future. It may not be numerical growth, but there has already been growth in maturity, wisdom, understanding,

faith, and the good fruit that comes from all these things. Our members indicated a desire to be different and move forward with what we have learned through this experience. Necessity moved people to do something for others and to engage with others. We need to keep this momentum as we continue to move forward and not fall back into our old ways of what was once normal to us.

Several of the research team members perceived this as an increase in faith among the members. This is a tried people and we have come through this stronger and better than we were before. We have forged new and better habits of connection. We are now in a state of internal regrowth. The congregation simply needs to refocus or regroup around a clearly articulated vision for what we believe God is calling us to become and to do. We need a renewed focus on what is important and what is our priority.

#### **Congregational Research Study Team Question Six:**

**Based on the responses, how do you sense that our collective sense of the importance of the church has been shaped through the experience of the past two years? Think both in terms of the importance of the church as a community of engagement and mutual encouragement through our meetings, relationships, and practices, as well as the importance of the church as the people of God who are called to join God in his mission to redeem the world.**

The overwhelming way that people responded indicates that we have been shaped in a very positive manner by the pandemic as it relates to our view of the church. We missed each other and we missed the physical touches, hugs, handshakes, and conversations about life and faith. We now recognize the importance of the church as the people and the relationships we have with one another in a way that we could not have known apart from this painful experience.

It is our God-given privilege that we belong to one another, and we have a God-given mutual obligation to care for one another.

The church is not an institution. The church is the family of God; and it is our family. Our hope is that this mindset is not simply selfishly motivated—as in, what can we get out of these relationships for our own benefit and enjoyment?—but rather an awareness that we are called to this *and* need this, that we are to be devoted to the fellowship in the same way as the first church was in Jerusalem (See Acts 2:42). This fellowship—that is nothing less than the eternal fellowship of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit—is about giving every bit as much as it is about receiving. And Jesus is the one who taught us that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

The pandemic was a collective wake up call. Too many of us had been taking things for granted. Now we realize just how precious and vital the fellowship and relationships of the church really are.

Offsetting these responses that stated an overwhelmingly strong sense of the importance of the church was the equally pronounced fear that was expressed in the responses that the pandemic experience is going to have the opposite effect on others; they will conclude that they do not need the community we know as church. This appeared to be the primary reason for why there was such a strong emotional response to the decision to suspend the in-person meetings of the church during the height of the pandemic. The very same members who said that this experience has caused them to value the church even more are afraid that the same experience has caused other members to devalue the church.

We did not name Satan in the survey, but our members did name him in the responses. And one of our research team members especially sensed the devil in the details of the study.



I heard and felt Satan in the whole thing. And when I look at everything, Satan had influence on people not coming back to church, the division and hurt, feelings of insecurity and inadequacy that makes people say, “I am not good enough,” and everything else. I think that this has shaped a lot of the comments and responses in this congregational study as well as in the past before the pandemic. We need to recognize these things. And we need to acknowledge that things have happened and here are the steps we are going to take as we go forward.

Another team member summed it up this way. “My takeaway is the church sensed we are to be changed to do life differently. We are to make needed changes for the world to see God’s people, the church, stay engaged, meeting together, to stay encouraged, so that we can go out into the world to be the face of Jesus.”

On the other hand, the research team noticed that there was very little in the congregational responses pointing to a renewed sense of the value of specific practices of the church like Bible study, worship, singing songs of praise to the Lord, community prayer, sharing in the Lord’s Supper, mission, and ministry. These were not entirely absent. A few members mentioned the importance of Bible study and there were a several responses that spoke about the mission of the church and the need to go and make disciples, and to be a light and example to the world. Likewise, there were responses that mentioned specific ministries that were abruptly by the pandemic. But most of the references to specific ministries pointed to the people that were impacted by the disruption of the church’s routines—in particular, the senior saints, youth, and children. In other words, it kept coming back to the people and relationships. This led one of our research team members to comment and ask, “I am not sure this was the importance of church, per se. Would any other group have had the same meaning or impact? Do these responses indicate the importance of church or is it simply relationship?”

The question is a valid question that might be explored through other research projects. But the consensus of the research team is that the heavy emphasis on relationships and

meaningful interactions with one another in the responses of the congregation simply underlines both what was especially missed and lost during the pandemic. Worship, Bible study, prayer gatherings, and other group gatherings were moved online. Several ministries adjusted their efforts to move forward and continue serving. What was lost was the energy, encouragement, and life-giving renewal that comes from the church coming together in the name of Jesus in one place to do all the things we were doing online.

Schools and businesses have wrestled with this same phenomenon. Many students struggled and underperformed and fell victim to depression and feelings of loneliness during the move to online learning and the elimination of extracurricular activities. Many businesses that initially thought remote work might be their future are now bringing their employees back to the offices. Something important has been lost without the in-person group interaction as human beings.

The same has been true of the church. This idea is as old as the oldest story of Scripture. “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18). And this is a core teaching of the church. We are one body. We belong to one another. The Greek word behind our “church” is *ekklesia*. It means “assembly.” A church that does not assemble is by definition a contradiction. Many, if not most, of our members were getting relational and social interactions with family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers all throughout the pandemic. But the interaction that they greatly desired is all the interaction that comes from the church assembled to worship and serve the Lord.

Returning to the question, “Do these responses indicate the importance of church or is it simply relationship?” The challenge remains for us to do the work of the church when we come together. We must not settle for community for the sake of community, relationships for the sake

of relationships, or simply the encouragement we need to get through another week. We must take advantage of our time together to spur one another on to love and good deeds. We must teach and exhort one another to walk in the ways of God. We must do all the things God has called us to do for and with one another as the body of Christ.

### **Congregational Research Study Team Question Seven:**

**As you answer this final cluster of questions, infuse into every question and response a profound sense of wondering “what might God be up to?” What do we do with all this information? What might God be telling us or revealing to us in these responses? How might these observations inform us as a congregation about our direction into the future and immediate next steps? What new goals do we need to set for ourselves in response to everything that has happened and the new challenges and opportunities that are now before us? What existing goals and priorities need to be reaffirmed? What conversations do we need to have with ourselves? Where do we go from here as we hope and pray to EMERGE better, stronger, together?**

In wrestling with this last cluster of questions, the research team focused on next steps in terms of conversations we need to have with ourselves as a congregation and the goals and priorities that need to be reaffirmed. Before exploring the team’s thoughts regarding next steps, here are some of the observations and conclusions from the team members in our effort to digest the responses of the congregation to the Day of Discovery. Despite the consensus of the research team that so much of the response of the congregation felt negative, when thinking through the congregational responses to all of the questions of the Day of Discovery through the wondering of “What might God be up to?”, the research team perceived a compelling hope for the future.

Here are some of the summary statements by the team members that give a strong sense of the hope that they saw.

Throughout the whole thing Joseph's words to his brothers keep coming to mind, "You meant this for evil, but God intended this for good."

God is cooking something up.

God wants us to step out of our comfort zone, start new things, try to connect and reconnect with people of faith, and those that are not of faith, to show people Jesus, to have the faith belief for change, to be active in intentional service, to not go back to the way it was, but to always be thinking about how we can minister to people in different ways. We need to minister to others so that they too are encouraged to go and work for God.

A final statement from the team provides a good starting point for how the team wrestled with the next steps. "We have to move forward and not just analyze the past."

The research team sensed that most of our people said that they are ready and willing to move forward and join in the work of the Lord. However, before addressing next steps related to what needs to be done for these members who are already ready to move forward, the team first turned its attention to those who indicated that for one reason or another, they are still hurting from everything or something that happened to them during the pandemic. They are not ready.

What follows are reflections on what we should carefully consider doing in response to what we heard from the congregation in their responses to the questions presented to them in the Day of Discovery, Renewal and Hope.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### NEXT STEPS: REFLECTING ON THE CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSES

#### **First Things First: Mending Relationships and Healing Hurts**

The consensus of the research team, including the individual who said, “We have to move forward and not just analyze the past,” was that a necessary first step in our immediate future is to listen to Jesus and make first things first. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made it clear what is to come first. “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24 NIV).

In light of these words of Christ and the words of pain members shared in their responses, we need to find meaningful ways to acknowledge and address the hurt, the division, and the other emotions that people felt during and immediately after the pandemic. Christ is about reconciliation and forgiveness, so must be his church. We need to instruct and coach our members on how to seek reconciliation, and how to find peace and healing from the Lord whether reconciliation in our human relationships happens or not.

In most instances related to the pandemic, people probably did not set out to hurt anyone. They believed they were speaking the truth that needed to be heard. Love, humility, and gentleness may have unintentionally been left out of the equation. Either in our haste to give an immediate response to a statement or in a moment of all the mounting frustrations we at times felt during the pandemic experience, we may have blurted out our unfiltered thoughts without careful consideration to how it might make someone else feel. In some instances, we may not

even be aware that someone was hurt. In all this, we need to remind our people of the way of the church. “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Colossians 4:6 NIV).

While this may feel like a step back into the past, it must be acknowledged that any pain that someone is still feeling from what happened in during the pandemic is not in the past. It is right here with them and us in the present. There will undoubtedly be tons of research and efforts in the coming years to explore, understand and help the countless people who were especially hurt and harmed by the pandemic experience, whether educationally, socially, emotionally, economically, relationally, and so on. The local church should be among the first responders who care enough to take the time to care for their wounded members and help them find healing, as well as anyone else who comes into our midst in the coming months, broken and hurting. Jesus did not ignore those who needed healing. He invited them to come to him, even when he was tired and worn out.

We also must not overlook the other side of this matter. In addition to the hurt and pain of those who felt wounded by the words of others or who felt devalued and taken for granted, there are likely those among us who feel ashamed of some of the things we said or did during the pandemic, knowing in hindsight that we offended and hurt others in the process.

After the resurrection of our Lord Jesus, we have some compelling stories that can challenge our impulse and desire to simply let go of the past and move forward. Beyond any doubt, there was much to do, and time was of the essence. But in an effort to move forward and not dwell on the past, Jesus did not ignore the events of the night he was betrayed. He did not act as if nothing happened. He did not attempt to sweep it under the rug and move forward. For

example, as recorded in John 21, our Lord Jesus took the time to address what had happened, specifically with Peter.

He did not shame Peter. He simply asked Peter some questions about his heart and his loyalty. “Do you love me?” Jesus asked. In the process of asking and answering this simple question, Jesus reaffirmed Peter in front of everyone. There can be no doubt that Peter needed this; and it is difficult to see how Peter could have managed to move forward in his ministry as an apostle of Christ without this intentional moment of talking about what had happened, not to access blame and not to increase shame, but rather to bring healing and reconciliation through reaffirmation of the mutual love and commitment shared between Peter and Jesus.

How many of our members need something just like this? For every honest response that indicated hurt and pain, how many others might there be who are also hurting? We need to find some practical and meaningful ways to help our people pursue both reconciliation and reaffirmation. Our leaders will need to model this behavior and lead the way.

One way that we might do this is to take a moment at the end of every worship assembly to give kudos to a member of the congregation. It might be a recognition of an individual member or a team of volunteers. But whatever it is, it is done publicly as an acknowledgement of what this person has done and the impact it has made. Along with this moment will be given the appeal to the entire church to make the effort this week to tell someone face-to-face how much they appreciate that person and all that they do.

Closely connected to this is helping, coaching and supporting our members when they feel devalued. It is an unfortunate part of life that someone will at times feel left out or overlooked. We need to help our people to learn new skills to raise their hand and speak up and share how they are feeling with the appropriate person(s). If a leader or the leadership as a whole

has in some way disappointed or wounded them, we want them to immediately seek an audience with the leader(s) to share how they are feeling, as opposed to letting this feeling fester and grow, or finding someone else in the congregation to commiserate with them and possibly stir up the same emotions in others. The latter is gossip; and we need to see this for what it is. The company that gossiping keeps in passages like Romans 1:29-32 and 2 Corinthians 12:20 makes it abundantly clear that gossiping is a grave and serious matter to the Lord. So, we must take it seriously. Letting our hurt fester and grow, or finding someone safe to share our complaint with, are the easy things to do; but Christ has taught us the better way.

Our leaders, in turn, need to be humble and approachable, ready and willing to listen with a gracious spirit to hear and understand without immediately becoming defensive or easily offended.

### **Practice the Right Kind of Honesty**

Part of the challenge in all of this is our emotions. As explored earlier in this thesis, fear, hurt and anxiety may be the primary emotion that we are feeling, but the secondary emotion of anger and resentment is what we present. For example, one participant in the Day of Discovery was overheard saying at the table, “I hope the leaders are prepared for this kind of honesty.” The question we might pose in response to a statement like this is, “What *kind* of honesty are we talking about?”

The community of God’s people we call the church needs honesty. Not only do we need the honest truth of God’s Word, we also need to be honest with ourselves and one another about everything that truly matters. It is too easy to keep our thoughts to ourselves, to stuff our feelings down and let our emotions fester away inside our hearts, minds, and bodies. This is unhealthy



and harmful to our individual health, bodily, spiritually, emotionally, and relationally. It can have a detrimental impact on our prayer life and our walk with Jesus.

Whether we feel overwhelmed, dejected, defeated, or we feel ignored, devalued and rejected, we can move to a dark place of self-pity and despair just like Elijah did long ago. God did great things through Elijah. Yet even after the mountaintop experience of the contest with the prophets of Baal and the way God immediately responded to his prayer to send rain to end a drought, Elijah was easily discouraged and wanted to quit. More than that, Elijah wanted to die (1 Kings 18-19). Instead of finding a fellow prophet and servant of the Lord with whom he could share how he is feeling and seek wise counsel and encouragement, Elijah completely withdrew himself from the community of God's people and disappeared.

This approach is equally unhealthy and harmful to the collective health of the church today. When we have members who are holding back what needs to be shared, members who are pulling back because they are wounded, discouraged, anxious, or angry, and members who are pulling out because they think that nobody cares, this hurts the entire community. And this can spread like a virus among us.

If Elijah had quit, what impact would this have had on the larger community of God's people? If members quit today—quit serving and leading in ministries, quit showing up for worship and Bible study, quit engaging with others to welcome, encourage, and pray with them, quit using whatever gifts the Lord has given them to faithfully serve others—what impact will this have on the larger community of the family of God?

God came to Elijah to talk things through with him. Elijah was honest with the Lord. Elijah told the Lord exactly how he was feeling and why. He felt like he was the only one left in

all of Israel who is seeking and serving the Lord. He felt like a miserable failure as a prophet of the Lord. And he wanted it to be over.

The Lord, in his turn, was honest with Elijah. The Lord told Elijah what he needed to hear. There are “seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him” (1 Kings 19:18). Before Elijah could “quit,” the Lord had a few more things he wanted Elijah to do. God had more plans for Elijah, plans for how God was going to make the world a better place through the actions of Elijah—including a succession plan in anointing Elisha to take up the mantle of prophetic leadership from Elijah at some point in the future. After Elijah had a season to mentor Elisha, instead of the Lord taking Elijah’s life as he had initially requested in his despair, the Lord simply took Elijah. God had a better plan for Elijah.

We need honesty in our lives, but we need the *right* “kind of honesty.” The church does not need brutal honesty that has no regard for how it sounds, how it is received, who it hurts, who it discourages, or any other consequence. The church needs charitable, gracious and humble honesty that is deeply concerned about the outcome of this kind of honesty. Brutal honesty is the way of the world. Weaponize your honesty, your words, your feelings, your opinions, your perspective, your truth, your statistical data and research. Use this kind of honesty to ruthlessly attack, criticize, ridicule and castigate your opponents. Give no consideration to respect, civility, or humility. Go on the offensive to make your case and win your cause at the expense of others, without regard to the collateral damage of people and relationships, and the irreparable harm or damage your brutal truth may cause. This is the way of the world, not the way of Christ and his people.

The Apostle Paul took up this conversation about not being like the world in Ephesians 4. He challenged the Christians of his age to stop living like the Gentiles who do not know God and to live as those who have put on the new self that is created in the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. This requires a renewal of the spirit of our minds. It is about a radical change and transformation from how we once lived like the world to becoming imitators of God (Ephesians 5:1). This includes how we talk to one another.

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths but only what is good for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you (Ephesians 4:29-32 NRSV).

Our words are to give grace to those who hear us, not contempt or ridicule. Failure to live this way and speak this way grieves the Holy Spirit of God. When our speech is full of bitterness, malice, anger and slander, we grieve the Holy Spirit. Instead, we are to be kind and tenderhearted. Ours is the way of the Lord, who returned evil speech at the cross with grace, compassion and kindness.

### **Disagree With Honor and Respect**

There are going to be times when we disagree. We will look at the same situation and arrive at different conclusions about what is the best way to address this matter. We will look at the different options that are in front us and reach different conclusions about what is the best way forward. Whenever this happens, and every time this happens, we need to be able to express our views and perspectives, our passions and convictions, our hopes and dreams, our concerns and fears, our wisdom and our feelings, while actively listening, hearing, and considering what

everyone else is saying too, with the goal of arriving at a course of action that is agreeable to everyone.

Even in those instances where a mutual agreement cannot be reached, when we find ourselves stuck in our disagreement, we need to be able to disagree with honor and respect. We need to be able to disagree with love and compassion for those with whom we disagree. Because the disagreement is not about the person or the people, per se; the disagreement is about an idea, a concern, or a conviction about what is the best path forward at this time.

Whenever different ideas and perspectives compete against each other and compel us to choose one way or the other, throughout the entire process of sorting through the possibilities, we need to be able to express our thoughts, feelings, and perspectives in way that is respectful and considerate of those who are reaching a different conclusion. The way we talk and express ourselves must prioritize our relationships as brothers and sisters in Christ over and above our desire to win the decision and get our way.

And whenever decisions are made that go against what we believe is the right or best decision for me and my house, or for everyone else, instead of resorting to the ways of the world to keep stirring things up and churning up fear, anger, anxiety, resentment, and slander, we need to continue to cultivate the Christian virtues of patience, kindness, humility and gentleness—even when we think we are right and they are wrong.

The instructions of 1 Timothy 6 are compelling and appropriate in any context where there is turmoil. Instead of allowing ourselves to get bogged down with “an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant frictions,” we need to “flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness” (1 Timothy 6:4-5, 11 NIV).

Even when we *are* right, not just when we *think* we are right, we *are* right, even in those situations love, endurance and gentleness are to prevail. This is not an easy task. Love and gentleness demand patient endurance to keep frustration and anger out of the equation.

Second Timothy 2:22-26 stresses how faithful followers of Christ are to engage with those who oppose them.

Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will (NIV).

### **Reclaim the Important Conversations**

#### **God Has Given to Us About the Kingdom of God**

The tragic reality of American life is that just about anything and everything about life is both politicized and polarized. This includes all the important conversations that are taking place in our nation about justice, concern for the poor, human sexuality, race, medical emergencies like the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and immigration.

The beauty of the Gospel of Jesus is that the kingdom of God touches on absolutely every aspect of our lives. God is deeply concerned about justice, mercy and compassion for the poor, human sexuality and purity. God did not cause the pandemic, but God has taught us to be a people who are devoted to good deeds in good times and bad, and to put the interests and welfare of others ahead of our own. We have brothers and sisters in Christ who have been displaced by the war in Ukraine. They are now living in various parts of Europe as foreigners and refugees of

the war. God watches over the foreigner and has instructed his people to treat immigrants, aliens and foreigners with fairness and kindness.

### **Be Wise and be a Light to the Nations**

There are two challenges and opportunities here. First, in many places and spaces of American life public conversations about important matters are rude, snarky, and condescending. Respect, honor, humility, are entirely absent. The challenge for God's people is not to conform to this pattern of thinking and behavior. The opportunity for God's people is to be a light to the nations and show everyone a better way to voice differences of opinions and to work together for the greater good of everyone.

We need to continue to remind our people that we are the people of God. We have a higher calling, an incredibly higher calling, than the world's standard for debate and disagreements. Even when we are talking about the most important thing we can possibly talk about—our faith and hope in Christ Jesus our Lord—even when those we are talking with are being rude and malicious and slanderous in their words to and about us, we are to speak with gentleness and respect. This is the Word of God in 1 Peter 3:15-16.

But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander (NIV).

Whether in person, in private conversations, in email messages, in social media, in yard signs, and every other form of conversation, we are to season our words with grace and say what we want and need to say with gentleness and respect. This is not the behavior we are seeing in the world, but this is one of the incredibly important ways we are to be light and salt in this generation.

Instead of thinking that when we are talking about the Christian faith, we are to do so with gentleness and respect, but when we are talking about anything that falls under the canopy of American politics, we can remove our Christian gloves and fight fire with fire, we need to take seriously the instructions of Scripture that urge us to approach every conversation with the same spirit of gentleness and respect.

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone (Colossians 4:5-6 NIV).

And this approach to conversations and disagreements is not limited to our conversations with outsiders; this approach applies equally to our conversations with one another in the body of Christ. This is a huge part of our individual and collective calling in Christ.

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Ephesians 5:16 NIV).

We must not be naïve about this. We know the world is watching us and eagerly looking for an opportunity to point out our hypocrisies and ridicule the church. Against this impulse to live like the world when it comes to our disagreements, we are to live in the teaching of 1 Peter 2:12: “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (NIV).

### **Ask God to Open Our Eyes: Cultivate a Christian Worldview**

The second challenge and opportunity before us is how we look at our world. The challenge is not to look at the world through the lens of NBC, CNN, or FOX, or the lens of any particular philosophy, political party or ideology, or even the lens of the American experience we

might call patriotism. The challenge and opportunity are to ask our God to open our eyes to see what the Lord sees and to see these things the way the Lord sees them.

We need to help our people to look at our world and the countless issues being debated from a Christian worldview. We need to help our people to resist every temptation and impulse to get anxious and angry, or rude and spiteful, whenever they are thinking and talking about current issues in our world and media, *and* we need to help our people realize that God has something significant, relevant and transformational to say about a lot of these things.

A moment in the ministry of Jesus is a helpful reminder of how important this is. In John 6 Jesus described himself as the bread of life that came down from heaven. Those who feed on this bread will live forever. Many of the disciples of Jesus responded by saying that this was a hard or difficult teaching and asked, “Who can accept it?” We should take note that this statement and question were made by *many of his disciples*. John 6:66-68 go on to explain, “Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life’” (NRSV). There will be times when the teachings of Scripture will be hard and difficult for us to hear and accept. But if we believe what Peter believed, Jesus has the words of life, we should ask the same question Peter asked. “Who else can we go to?”

Deeply embedded within this challenge and opportunity is yet another challenge. When we begin the process of searching through Scripture and seeking the Lord’s wisdom and guidance in prayer about how we as God’s people ought to think about current issues in our world, and what we ought to do as followers of Christ about whatever the issue may be, we must resist the notion that this is abandoning the Gospel to pursue politics. How we are to live in this



world is *the* conversation of Scripture. We believe we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. We must not allow the world to “politicize” any conversation God has given to us so that it becomes taboo and off limits to the church and silences Christians from speaking of these matters in open and honorable discourse.

There is, of course, always a danger that we might allow any contemporary topic or issue to demand too much of our time, attention and energy, especially if it is particularly explosive in our society. Wisdom, discretion, and restraint are to guide us in all things. But we cannot allow this concern to move us to one of two inappropriate moves. One mistake is to assume that if the matter has become politicized in American culture, then we need to avoid talking about it at all costs. Afterall, we live in a world where everyone seems to be politicked off, as someone has put it, about one thing or another. If we talk about something that is political, it is going to tick someone off, and it is going to divide us. So, it might be suggested that the best move is to avoid talking about anything that someone may construe as political.

The danger here cannot be overstated. If we go down that path, we muzzle ourselves and the Word of God. We do not consult the Lord through Scripture or prayer. As the community that seeks to know and do God’s will in all things, this is incredibly problematic. Instead of coming together to consult the Lord through Scripture and prayer, we leave everyone to their own devices to decide on their own how to think and behave. Only they are not really on their own; they are thinking through these issues with other people through conversations, social media, books, movies, television programming, talk radio, the Internet, and everything else.

The old adage, “You don’t talk about politics in the church,” challenges us, because even if we are not talking about “politics” *in* and *with* the church, the church *is always* thinking and talking about politics, the church is engaged with politics, and the church is being influenced and

shaped by this engagement with American politics. If it is the conviction of a Christian that his or her Christian leaders should not and ought not talk with them about anything that is deemed political, then this Christian should not and ought not talk to anyone else about anything that is deemed political.

The church is not a chapel, a cathedral, or any other building. The church is not what happens for a few hours every Lord's Day. The church is the people who make up the body of Christ. If someone embraces the adage that "you don't talk about politics in the church," then as a member of the church that person should not talk about politics, *ever*, because this person is always *in* and *with* the church, since this person, along with all other Christians, is the church.

Nobody holds that perspective. It is impossible to do so, because just about everything in life is politicized. We must talk about the things of God and his kingdom, even when these things become politicized. For example, marriage and all sorts of matters related to sexual ethics and purity are fully politicized in America. The church cannot stop searching Scripture and praying to God for instruction, guidance, wisdom, and courage to know and do the will of God even when it has become a political matter over which our nation has become divided. Quite the opposite, such issues as this allow us opportunities to engage with each other, our children and grandchildren, our neighbors, coworkers and friends who do not yet know and follow the Lord, about why we believe what we believe, and how this is connected to our faith in the risen Lord—always with gentleness and respect, not with anger and contempt for those who neither follow Jesus nor his teachings.

As we open our hearts and minds before the Word of God with a desire to know and do the will of God in any contemporary issue, we need to stop harboring suspicions that these conversations are politically motivated versus kingdom of God and will of God motivated; and

we need to stop making the accusation that engaging in these conversations is becoming like the world. The whole point of these conversations among God's people is to seek to know and do the will of God, not to become like the world.

### **Allow God to Remove Our Masks/Veils and Embrace the Freedom this Gives**

If we take all of this seriously, this process will inevitably lead us to yet another challenge: What is standing between us and the text of Scripture? What lens are we looking through as we read the Word of God? And how is this lens shaping and possibly distorting our understanding of the story and will of God revealed to us in Scripture?

The story of Moses and the Israelites once again provides us with a helpful metaphor. The Apostle Paul explained that one of the challenges for the Jews of his day was that whenever they read Scripture, they did so with a veil covering their heart. The Christian, by comparison, is to remove the veil. As Paul put it, "Whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away" (2 Corinthians 3:16 NIV).

Paul never names the veil. He simply says that it is there whenever the Israelites read the old covenant, and then added that it is only in Christ that the veil is taken away (v. 14). Our hope in Christ, and the greater glory of the ministry of the new covenant, the ministry of the Spirit that gives life, gives us the courage to remove the veil, a move Paul describes as being "very bold" (2 Corinthians 3:12).

When we open the Word of God and open our hearts and minds to the Word of God, are we bold and courageous enough to remove the veil or veils we wear—whether consciously or subconsciously? If so, when we make the honest attempt to remove the veils we wear, we need to be prepared for the freedom this gives us. This again is the Apostle Paul's language.

But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:16-18 NIV)

Some of the resistance to wearing of face coverings during the height of the pandemic was driven out of concerns for freedom. For anyone who wants to be free to see the Lord's glory in Scripture and allow it to transform us, we must allow the Lord to remove our veils for us. When we allow God to do this, we will begin to recognize that our political priorities, convictions, and affiliations may at times be at odds with the Word and will of God.

Beyond this, we must recognize that in spite of how many times we may have pledged allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, through our confession and baptism into the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, we have pledged our lives, bodies, hearts and minds to Christ Jesus our Lord, the one who laid his life and body for us all, and the one about whom the voice from heaven spoke on the mountain where Jesus was transfigured, "This is my Son whom I have chosen; listen to him" (Luke 9:35 NIV).

This is not about being apolitical. This is not about being unpatriotic. This is about following Christ. This is about seeking God's kingdom and righteousness first. When we open the Bible to explore Scripture together to talk about a current issue in our age, we are not bringing politics into the church, and we are not attempting to choose a side in the American political system; we are attempting to know and do the will of God.

This is the admonition of Ephesians 5:15-17. "Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is" (NIV).

We want to teach our church to pray the prayer of Colossians 1:9-10.

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, . . . (NIV)

Our citizenship is in heaven. In keeping with the teaching of 1 Peter 2:11, we are to see ourselves as aliens, pilgrims, strangers, sojourners, exiles, and foreigners in this life. Whatever patriotic impulses we may have, we must see ourselves and our place in this world in light of the Gospel of Jesus. Our God is the father all nations, not just one.

### **Reframe Our Conversations**

One of the responses that surprised the research study team centered on how one of our members spoke of the will of God. This person said, “It was hard when we stopped meeting because it felt like a lack of trust in the Lord to do his will. Whatever He wants will be done.” It is beyond the scope of this project to plow into a deep exploration of how we are to understand the sovereign will of God and out of fairness to this member, if he or she had an opportunity to elaborate on this statement it might have been more nuanced. But as the statement was given, if whatever God wants will be done, the temporary closing of churches around the world is exactly what God wanted, because that is what happened. Yet that appears the opposite of what this member said. “[W]hen we stopped meeting. . . it felt like a lack of trust in the Lord to do his will.”

These words point to the need for us to reframe our conversations. We need to choose our words carefully and think through the unintended implications of what we are saying. In the story of Job, his friends said a lot of things they believed were true, yet their words were not

helpful to Job. They were convinced Job had sinned in some way. They believed God was punishing Job for his unfaithfulness in this matter. That was the only framework they had for explaining why so much misfortune had fallen on Job. Despite Job's protests, they were unable to reframe the conversation and see Job's experience any other way.

We need to learn from their primary mistake. We need to find a way to reframe the conversation about the sovereign will of the Lord. God was testing Job, fully expecting Job to be faithful. God was not punishing Job. Yet the only way his friends could imagine God at work in this awful experience was to believe God was punishing Job. As a result, they accused Job of sin. How might we have been making the same mistake during the pandemic? How might we have been accusing one another of sin when no sin had occurred?

Along these same lines, another thing that surprised the research team was how many members shaped the conversation with a strict faith versus fear dichotomy. Several members who evidently wanted to press forward without any COVID protocols believed they were living by faith whereas those who gave careful consideration to the medical community's recommendations for how to keep the COVID cases at sustainable levels for our hospitals were cast as living in fear—as in, without faith.

For example, one member stated, “The most difficult challenge was the frustration of Christians seemingly so scared of dying that they don't believe they are going to be with the Lord. The church responded just like the world.” Another said, “When Christ comes back, I believe that he will say to Woodland West particularly, ‘Oh ye of little faith during the pandemic during that dark time.’”

This assessment of a lack of faith included the leaders of the congregation in their decisions related to the pandemic. Several members made statements like, “I felt a huge

disappointment with my church leaders, feeling that they made more decisions out of fear rather than faith.” Even those who did not name the leaders voiced the same sentiment saying things like. “I feel that we were being like the world and being ruled by fear.”

As was pointed out earlier, these voices were a minority group within the responses, but it points out how difficult it was during the pandemic for us to give grace and compassion to those who were coming to different decisions than our own about how they would navigate the pandemic. Undoubtedly there were those who made decisions during the pandemic out of fear. For example, people hoarded toilet paper and other goods out of fear of running out.

Fear and anxiety were a huge part of the pandemic experience. This is why the secondary responses of anger and hostility kept boiling up to the surface in America. But casting everyone, and especially every follower of Christ, who made the decision to listen to the consensus voice of the medical community as living by fear instead of faith is an unfair assessment. The shepherds of the congregation made their decisions out of concern for the welfare of both our congregation and our larger community. Concern and fear are not synonymous. This is yet another example of the polarizing impact of the pandemic.

Ironically, one of the members who shared this dichotomy of fear versus faith began their comments by saying that the hardest part of the pandemic experience had been “navigating the vast differences, approaches and attitudes, concerns, etc., and then formulating a Christ-like response that is honest and considerate of others’ differences. The most difficult challenge was the frustration of Christians seemingly so scared of dying that they don’t believe they are going to be with the Lord, the church responded just like the world.”

This honest response shows just how difficult this was for all of us. On the one hand we recognized the need to have a Christ-like response that is “considerate of others’ differences” and

conclusions. On the other hand, this person categorized others as making their decisions based on fear rather than faith, and said, “the church responded just like the world.” Categorically casting ourselves as “faith” and others as “fear” is neither considerate nor fair.

We need to reframe the conversation. We need better terminology. We need to dial back the rhetorical intensity. We need to say whatever it is that we want to say with gentleness and respect. And we need to stop passing judgment on one another.

As one who lived through the pandemic as a husband, father, and a minister of a local congregation of believers, I never felt fear from COVID-19. I was not afraid of getting COVID-19 any more than I am afraid of getting the flu. For the record, I do not want to get the flu, or COVID-19, or any other sickness, but that does not mean I am afraid of these things if I do something to protect myself from getting these illnesses. I did not fear it would end my life should I get COVID-19. But I did get vaccinated, and I got a booster shot. I wore a mask in public spaces and maintained the six feet of social distancing wherever this was recommended or required. I even refrained from travel and being with my elderly parents during the holidays because they had opted not to be vaccinated. In spite of these things, I, along with several members of my family, eventually got COVID-19. The symptoms were unpleasant but mild enough that nobody needed medical attention.

All these efforts were done in the spirit of doing my part to curb the spread of COVID-19 in my community, not to protect my life. It had nothing to do with fear. Those who listened to the recommendations of the medical community willingly made what we deemed appropriate personal sacrifices for the greater good of the communities we live in and the people we love who live in these communities. Our motivation was love, not fear. So, it stung a little bit for someone to categorize our motivation as fear instead of love and compassion.



Stepping out of the COVID experience might be helpful in grasping how faith versus fear was not a helpful dichotomy. We do not frame our conversations about flu shots this way. Some people, especially those who are at higher risk, choose to get the flu shot every year because their primary care physicians recommend it to them. Others choose not to. It is a personal decision about one's health and wellbeing. It is not a matter of faith versus fear.

In the same way, we do not frame conversations about hospital and medical protocols that require medical personnel and visitors to wear masks and gloves during surgeries or when tending to patients who have infectious diseases or other conditions that are highly contagious. We expect it and we comply with it, because we understand the nature of germs and how they are transmitted. We are not offended when our dental hygienist insists on wearing gloves and masks and using equipment that has been properly sterilized before it goes into our mouths. We get it. Medical and health safety protocols need to be observed.

The same can be said about every matter of health. Availing ourselves of medications and medical procedures is not about faith versus fear. We have never framed our conversations about personal and community health in this way in the past. COVID-19 was different. For some reason some of us found ourselves speaking of this strictly as faith versus fear.

The world responded by making every matter of COVID-19 a political and polarizing matter. Choose a side and double down on the inflammatory and alienating rhetoric. We know that this trend will not stop with COVID-19. Instead of conforming to the pattern of this world, we must learn how to reframe every conversation with wisdom, gentleness and grace. The world will always attempt to give us a script; God has given us Scripture.

## **Be Different from the World in Ways That Matter**

A recurring thought expressed by members of Woodland West was our calling as the church of the Lord to be different from the world. Here is a sample of these thoughts in their own words.

My fear is that we will respond to what is going on in the world the same way the world responds.

We were doing what the world wanted.

The church responded just like the world.

My biggest fear for the church is that we are conforming to the ways of the world so that we can become more popular in the community and among other religious bodies. We are to remain separate from the ways of the world. Paul taught us that we are to live in the world but not conform to the world.

I feel Christians fell down on showing how we are different from the world.

My hope is that those who feel the world has the answers would understand that God deems us His children.

I hope the pandemic experience causes us to learn to love and forgive each other in a way that is different from the world.

Nobody quoted Scripture, but at least one member alluded to Romans 12:1-2, and it is difficult to imagine that passages like this were not front and center in the minds of every other member who spoke of how the church is to be different from the world.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will (NIV).

The question we must ask ourselves is how or in what ways are we to be different from the world? Context is everything. These responses from our members were given both to questions of fear and hope. Some of these statements were made in response to the decision to

move worship online during the height of the pandemic and the initial COVID protocols when we first returned to meeting in person. In observing these recommendations from the medical community, we were being like the businesses, schools and other organizations of the world.

One member's statement flowed out of the opening line of his/her response, "I feel America is full of hate." Another response flowed out of "the frustration of Christians seemingly so scared of dying that they don't believe they are going to be with the Lord. The church responded just like the world."

Other responses were given in the context of members' hope for the future. "I hope the pandemic experience causes us to learn to love and forgive each other in a way that is different from the world."

The challenge of these statements, and any statement that says "the church" is, who is meant by "the church." Is it the church as a whole? Is it *some* members of the church? Is it the *leaders* of the church? Without further clarification, there is no way to know.

Likewise, there is a challenge in discerning exactly what was meant by being like the world. Was this pointing to the way the pandemic experience angered so many people and resulted in ugly and hateful behavior? Was this pointing to the way the pandemic experienced divided America?

For at least a few of our members, it appears that the church leaders listening to the recommendation and pleas of health community was responding the way the world responded to the pandemic. But saying that the church responded the way the world responded ignores the reality that the world, and certainly "the world" in America, was deeply divided over this matter.

Some of the world adamantly refused to listen to the health community. Some of the world called the whole thing a scamdemic. Some of the world refused to wear a mask. Some of

the world pushed back and ignored the appeals to get vaccinated. Some of the world attempted to kidnap the governor of Michigan. The world did not react or respond to the pandemic in a consistent pattern. As a result, no matter how the church responded to the pandemic, it would have been open to this accusation that “the church responded just like the world.”

The use of this language and the desire by our members that we are to be different from the world presents us with an opportunity to revisit passages like Romans 12:2 in a way to remind ourselves of this calling and to clarify exactly what it means to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. This is not about health and safety protocols, per se. This is about our response to our Lord Jesus laying down his life for us: One person willingly putting aside his own self-interests for the sake of the interests and needs of others, as the Apostle Paul explained it in Philippians 2:1-11.

We need to lean into this mindset of being different from the world in the sense that we are to be the light of the world and an example to the world of how to live with compassion and wisdom that aims to provide for the welfare and interests of every member of the community, how to deal with differences of opinions, how to deal with the very real and different needs of different members of this community, and how to welcome, accept and love people of every tribe, language and ethnicity within our community, and everything else that is part of the righteousness and kingdom of God.

We are not to be like the world in its brokenness, its darkness, despair, anger, hatred and hostility. But this does not mean that we avoid the good things of this world like work, commerce, education, medicine and healthcare. As a rule, we are like the world in all these things, only we engage in these things according to the holy will of God. But participating in these things is not what the Apostle Paul was talking about in Romans 12.

To categorize churches that participated in the overall effort to slow the spread of COVID by temporarily suspending worship assemblies and practicing COVID protocols when they came back together as following the example of the world or doing what the world does is to miss the point of such teachings in Scripture. One of the matters that thankfully did not get politicized in America offers a curious glimpse into how our members perceived our congregational COVID protocols that did not involve wearing a mask or social distancing in our assemblies: how we share the Lord's Supper.

The only reason churches in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have multiple cups for the Lord's Supper is out of public health concerns. The move to multiple cups in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was controversial, but not political in the way that all COVID protocols and policies became during the pandemic. One cup or multiple cups for the Lord's Supper was a matter of the church and not the world. However, this church matter was very much rooted in the health concerns of living in this world full of sickness and the recommendation of the larger health community around the world.

Commenting on this practice specifically in the Churches of Christ and Christian Churches that were part of the Stone-Campbell Movement, Paul M. Blowers and Byron C. Lambert summarize what brought about this change. "Another development in the nineteenth century, the alarming spread of tuberculosis, induced churches to replace the use of the single cup with small individual cups distributed in trays to the congregants."<sup>98</sup> This change was not unique to Churches of Christ. The same considerations and pressures were being felt in all

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<sup>98</sup> Paul M. Blowers and Byron C. Lambert, "The Lord's Supper," *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 491.

churches, and not unlike the recommendations of the health community during the COVID-19 pandemic, much of the pressure in the previous centuries came from the health community.<sup>99</sup>

This was not a biblical or theological move. This was a move that was rooted in the concern for the public health of a community where many Christians were gathering on a regular basis to share the Lord's Supper.

Was the move of the church in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to use multiple cups in sharing the Lord's Supper following the example of the world? Should we undo that change today? Are we afraid of using one cup? As Blowers and Lambert go on to explain, the move to a hygienic practice was not embraced by all churches. "A small segment of 'One Cup' Churches of Christ, concentrated mainly in Texas, have strictly upheld single cup observance of the Lord's Supper."<sup>100</sup> These churches maintain that the other churches gave into the pressure to conform to the ways of the world.

As multiple variants of COVID-19 continue to make their way around the globe, it remains to be seen how long any local church may continue to use prepackaged all-in-one communion supplies for the Lord's Supper. Some are wondering if we will ever go back to the way things were in this matter.<sup>101</sup> But the transition to multiple cups at the beginning of the twentieth century and the transition to prepackaged bread and cups here at the beginning of the

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<sup>99</sup> For example, see "Unclean Communion Cups: The Indiana State Board of Health Recommends the Use of Individual Chalices," *The Baltimore Sun* (February 14, 1898), 2. Online access to this can be found at [www.newspapers.com/clip/25657499/communion-cups](http://www.newspapers.com/clip/25657499/communion-cups). Accessed on March 17, 2023. For churches around the world that did not move to multiple cups in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries, the global pandemic caused them to reopen the question of what to do about the cup.

<sup>100</sup> Blowers and Lambert, 491.

<sup>101</sup> Cheryl Mann Bacon, "'Rip and Sip' Communion Cups May Be New Normal," *Christian Chronicle* (June 15, 2021). [christianchronicle.org/rip-and-sip-communion-cups-may-be-new-normal](http://christianchronicle.org/rip-and-sip-communion-cups-may-be-new-normal). Accessed March 17, 2023.

twenty-first century share the same concern—the spread of germs. The move was made not out of theological concerns that rise up out of Scripture, but purely out of hygienic concerns both for the congregation and the larger community where it meets. Were these decisions following the example of the world and acting out of fear and a lack of faith?

Not one member of Woodland West mentioned any concern or complaint about the church's COVID protocol related to communion in the responses of the Day of Discovery. This is a curious absence from the things that members lamented as either being lost or expected to do during the pandemic experience. The Lord's Supper is a pivotal part of our gatherings. We made a significant change in how we do this, and nobody mentioned it in the Day of Discovery.<sup>102</sup> The government and CDC restrained themselves from offering any guidance on this matter. So, it did not become politicized. Churches around the world were left to make their own decision.

How many members of churches in America would find another church if their church were to suddenly revert to the former centuries old practice of one cup for communion? None of our members thought of this change as following the example of the world. So why were any of the other COVID protocols viewed in this way? We can only wonder how the pandemic experience in our churches would have been different had the various COVID protocols not become politicized and divisive in the larger American culture. Which leads to a question to ponder in the spirit of Romans 12:2. How might our negative responses to the church's COVID protocols be construed as the church conforming to the pattern of this world? Anger and resentment over COVID protocols originated in the world, not the church.

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<sup>102</sup> One member mentioned this change in the oral presentations of the Day of Discovery, pointing to this as one of the good changes that came about as a result of the pandemic.

However any of us see these things, the use of this language by our members points us to a new opportunity to explore how we understand our place in this world as the body of Christ that is continually being transformed by the renewing of our minds. We are not to be conformed to the pattern of this world; rather we are predestined to be conformed to the image of the Son of God (Romans 8:29). We are to put aside the ways of the world— sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, greed, anger, rage, malice, bitterness, slander, and filthy language—and we are to put on the new self “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:24 NIV).<sup>103</sup> Reaffirming this high calling in Christ will be a necessary part of our way forward, both individually and collectively.

### **Clarify and Amplify the Distinction between Division and Disagreement or Differences of Opinions**

The language in the responses of the congregation suggested that we tend to interpret disagreements and differences of opinions as division. In some instances, this may be true. But we should not confuse disagreements and differences of opinions with division. These terms are not synonymous. We can disagree strongly about practical, personal, and congregational matters—we can hold different opinions about a wide host of things—and remain undivided in the relationships that matter to us, whether in friendships, marriages, family, or the family of Christ.

Romans 14 and 15 provides clear instructions for how Christians are to address pronounced and prolonged disagreements among themselves. In ancient Rome the Christians had

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<sup>103</sup> Ephesians 4:17-32 and Colossians 3:1-17 provide Paul’s lists of vices from the world that we are to leave behind and the things of God that we are to put on in Christ.



strong and differing convictions about such things as eating meats, drinking wine, and observing certain days as holy or sacred above other days. The Apostle Paul pressed hard into the Gospel of Jesus and reasoned that as followers of Christ we are not to allow such disagreements to divide us. The kingdom of God does not consist in such things as these. Paul concluded his instructions to the church with these words.

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. . .

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:5-7, 13 NIV)

The kingdom of God is not a matter of medical and health protocols, the washing of hands, wearing of masks, and vaccines. The kingdom of God is not about political parties, elections, candidates, or hot button political positions. We must not allow our disagreement over such things to divide us; and we must be careful not to confuse disagreement or differences of opinions with division. The fact that we are divided over our beliefs, convictions, opinions, preferences, and practices related to all things COVID-19, does not mean that we are, in fact, divided. It simply means that we disagree and hold to different priorities and conclusions based on how we experienced the pandemic.

This distinction between disagreement and differences of opinions versus division is important in other matters as well. It is a core concept of the church that in Christ we are one body as it is expressed in Ephesians 4:4. It is on this basis we are called to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3). But this unity of the Spirit is not to be confused with conformity and agreement of Christians in every matter. We are not the

same and we will not always agree, and it is perhaps especially in these places that we need to be reminded of our calling in Christ to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

### **Reaffirm What We Believe God Is Calling Us to Be and to Do**

In spite of how difficult it was to discern a consensus of what people were saying in response to the question of what would motivate them to pursue renewal as we emerge from the pandemic experience, the research team sensed that most of our people said that they are ready and willing to move forward and join in the work of the Lord. Throughout the congregational responses, there was a repeated concern for the mission of the church to share the Good News of Jesus with those who do not yet know the Lord.

Beyond this mission to make disciples of all nations, our members want our congregational goals to be clearly defined and articulated. As we emerge from the pandemic, what are our priorities and goals? What are we setting out to do in the name of Jesus? What are we striving to become and to do?

A few members specifically said they do not want us to simply go back to doing what we did before the pandemic. Unfortunately, they did not name anything specific. What is it about the past that they want to leave behind? Or is this more about a desire to do new things in new ways? Without any specific details, this remains an open door for further discussion and exploration as part of clarifying and reaffirming both our core mission and our short-term and long-term goals.

The congregational process of Dreaming Again in 2017 and 2018 will serve us well in this matter. The shepherds and ministers, working with the members of the 2025 Implementation Team, can share the overarching themes, goals and priorities that came from that process with

the entire congregation again. This renewed effort to reaffirm our congregational goals and objectives will also be beneficial for new members who have come to Woodland West since 2017. None of this goes without saying. We have to say it again and again.

### **Vulnerability as Our Way Forward**

There simply is no way to know how the pandemic would have played out in America and around the world if we had simply gone about life as usual—no masks, no vaccines, no shutdowns, no school closures and the move to online education, no remote working, and no churches moving to online worship. There is no going back to the beginning of 2020 to try something different.

When the pandemic came to America, many Christians immediately made the decision to stay home before there were any government health emergency declarations. Our attendance was immediately cut in half. When churches reopened, many of these same people continued to stay away. Every time there was a spike in COVID cases in our community, there was a reciprocal dip in the number of members who attended worship. If churches like Woodland West had not temporarily suspended their worship assemblies, the pandemic experience would have been different, but there is no way to know what outcome this would have brought to the church for good or bad, better or worse.

Would there be guilt, remorse, and anger if many of our at-risk members had died as a result of our congregation ignoring the health community's recommendations to take drastic measures? This is what happened in Sweden. Sweden initially chose a very different path during the pandemic than the U.S. and many other European countries and had a much higher mortality

rate among their senior citizens than comparable nations. In June 2020, the Swedish government established a National Commission to examine their nation's management of COVID-19.

In March 2020, the NBHW [National Board of Health and Welfare] urged people aged 70 plus to limit personal contacts to avoid COVID-19. Citizens of all ages were also asked to observe social distancing, wash their hands regularly with soap and water for at least 20 s[econds], avoid non-essential travel and work from home if possible. The Commission concluded that Sweden's overall strategy to protect older people and other risk groups failed.<sup>104</sup>

Would there be discouragement and resentment among members who continued to meet with the church towards those who opted to stay home out of their concerns for their health or the safety of the at-risk family members who live with them? Specifically, would there have been resentment among members who were volunteering more of their time and energy to compensate for those who had opted to stay home? Would there be resentment among members who would see and hear of other members out and about for shopping and dining, but for some reason choosing to stay home from worship, Bible study, and other church activities? Some of these feelings were expressed in the congregational study. Would these kinds of feelings have been exacerbated if we had simply ignored the pandemic and attempted to press forward without any changes? If so, how would this have impacted the church?

Again, there is no way to know with any degree of certainty; but it is likely that there would have been a whole other set of problems, challenges, frustrations and setbacks that would have come from taking a different path. We were clearly divided in our opinions about whether or not we should have stopped meeting and whether or not we should have had COVID protocols

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<sup>104</sup> Jonas F. Ludvigsson, "How Sweden Approached the COVID-19 Pandemic: Summary and Commentary on the National Commission Inquiry, *Acta Paediatr.* 112 (2023): 20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apa.16535>. Accessed on April 12, 2023.

in place when we resumed meeting. If we had attempted to proceed as normal throughout the pandemic, it still would not have been normal. All that would have accomplished is a flip of the script. Those who felt we should have stopped meeting, those who felt that we should have COVID protocols when we first came back together, would have stayed home and felt devalued and marginalized by the decisions that went against them and their concerns for their safety and health, especially for those who either were at risk or were caregivers to those who were at risk.

There is no point in attempting to make a case that everything would have been different and better if we had just ignored the pandemic and went about life as usual. There is no way to know what would have happened if we had taken a different path. A few members indicated in the congregational study that the decisions by our leaders to move worship online and to have COVID protocols in place when we came back for in-person worship divided the church. This assessment misses the point. The congregation was already divided over these matters, along with all of America. Decisions had to be made one way or the other; but these decisions did not divide the congregation. The larger pandemic experience had unfortunately already divided us. Several members spoke of how they experienced this reality of division in terms of differences of opinions about congregational COVID protocols through the comments they read or heard from other members.

No one experienced the pandemic in the same way. Our individual perspectives and willingness to take health related risks were shaped by our personal stories, the at-risk people in our lives, our political priorities and convictions, our source for news, information, and guidance about COVID-19, and even our understanding of the providence and will of God.

What everyone in this church indicated through their participation in the Day of Discovery is that they highly value the relationships of the church as the family of God. We

keenly felt the loss of our face-to-face interaction. Even when we came back together, the need, or requirement, depending on one's perspective, to wear a mask continued to deprive us of the face-to-face intimacy that we value and desire.

Instead of continuing down the path of certitude in a vain attempt to validate beyond a shadow of a doubt who was right and who was wrong in every decision made regarding the pandemic at the national, state, local and congregational level, the way forward has to be found in pursuing together the kingdom of God and his righteousness. The righteousness or values of God and his kingdom are the very core priorities that the church expressed in this congregational study.

The teachings of Christ and the Apostles overwhelming emphasize relationships as the core matter of the Christian faith, starting with our relationship with God. All the teachings in Scripture about ethics and morality flow out of relationships. Jesus emphatically made this point when he said that all the commandments in Scripture hung on the commandments to love God with all that we are and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:34-40). In other words, our attitudes, thinking, decisions and behavior are to be guided, shaped, and informed by our concern and priority for our relationships with God and one another.

Another teaching of Christ echoes this priority of making ourselves vulnerable to the needs and interests of others as opposed to asserting our individual rights or personal preferences. "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12 NIV). Or as another translation puts it, "In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (NASB).

Again, it is encouraging to observe that everyone affirmed this in their answers. We know this and we get it. Our God and our faith are all about relationships and love. But the pandemic experience presented us with yet another opportunity to explore how to navigate the tension embedded within the Golden Rule. What do we do to and for one another when we want or need very different things?

At the very beginning of the pandemic experience, all the way back on March 19, 2020, during that initial week that the decision was made to temporarily suspend meeting together for Sunday morning worship, the email message sent to the church reminded our members how Philippians 2:1-11 points us to the example of Christ in showing us the way of love.

Our call in Christ is to put the interests of others ahead of our own, just as Christ did. We are to think about those who are vulnerable and at risk if they become infected by this virus. We are to think of the people we know and love, and the people we don't know but are called to love, in our every action in life. When we take every appropriate action to protect not just ourselves, but everyone else, to reduce the likelihood that we are spreading this coronavirus, we are acting in love.

The pandemic brought a lot of tensions into how we live out these core teachings of Scripture and the ways of God. We had to grapple with what is the best way to show love in uncharted territory that for a while was constantly changing. Our collective efforts to physically protect those at risk—including the need to avoid creating superspreader events through the large gatherings of churches and schools so that our hospitals were not overwhelmed with patients—inevitably resulted in emotional, relational, and mental pain, stress, and harm. We knew this going to happen—it was unavoidable—so we asked everyone to do their part to step up, to fill in the gaps, and to go the extra mile every day and every week in doing whatever it takes to be engaged in one another's lives without the worship assembly of the church, knowing that it was only a temporary measure. Love demanded that we do this.

It was taxing, because so many of us were already doing more and having to learn new skills and ways to live as a result of the pandemic. It was stressful, because our world was anxious and angry. It was tiring, because the needs were great. It was frustrating, because of all the uncertainties; we did not know how long this would last.

The global pandemic may be far from over, but thankfully, at least the national public health emergency appears to be ending in May of 2023.<sup>105</sup> The pandemic will prove to be helpful to the future of the church if we allow what we have relearned about the all-encompassing priority of relationships and love to take centerstage in our lives. Love and relationships are not about convenience. Love and relationships are about deep and abiding commitments that move us to personal sacrifice for the sake of others.

I pray that our eyes have been fully opened to how extraordinarily important this is in every aspect of church and faith. We are a holy, sacred community. We are one body—the body of Christ Jesus our risen Lord. We are nothing less than the absolute and full *koinonia* fellowship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This fellowship is about relationships and love through and through.

This makes us vulnerable to another, in the sense that what we do or do not do impacts the other, for good or harm, for better or worse. When we choose to show up to meet with the church for Sunday worship, for Bible studies on Sunday and Wednesday, when we choose to arrive early and stay late for these events so that we can engage in meaningful conversations about life, faith, challenges, struggles, hopes and dreams, when we choose to give of ourselves

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<sup>105</sup> Alice Park, “The U.S. COVID-19 Public Health Emergency Ends in May. Here’s What Will Change,” *Time* (January 31, 2023). <https://time.com/6251520/covid-19-public-health-emergency-ends-what-changes/>. Accessed April 17, 2023.



and put the interests of others ahead of our own, when we choose to give of our time during the week either to serve the needs of others or for the sake of making or deepening relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ, it makes a difference for good. And when we instead choose not to do these things, regardless of the reason why, it makes a difference in the opposite direction. There is no neutral option or outcome. Everything that was true of the impact of the church not meeting together during the pandemic is true of the impact of part of the church not meeting together now that the public health emergency is over.

I pray that the 12-week break from meeting together as a church, and all of the COVID protocols that were in place both in our church community and the larger community, will wake the church up to the Word of God in Hebrews 10:24-25. “And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (NRSV). Could it be that the trend of the previously mentioned rapid decline of faith, church attendance, and church affiliation in America is directly linked to the habit of “some” Christians in the past half century who neglected to meet together with the church?<sup>106</sup> If our eyes were opened to how the entire church not meeting together had a huge impact on everyone, how is it escaping our attention that “some” neglecting to meet together with the church is having the same kind of impact?

Ironically, the way forward is a return to the old ways of the past—but not the past of the last quarter century. We must not return to our old “normal” church attendance patterns, and we must not return to our old “normal” way of arriving late and leaving as soon as we can without any meaningful engagement with one another, as if we do not belong to one another or have an

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<sup>106</sup> Jones.

obligation to one another (Romans 12:5). “Provoke” in the above text from Hebrews 12:24 is a strong and intense word. Other English translations render this as “spur” (NIV) and “stir up” (RSV). The only other use of this term in Scripture is in the opposite direction. It is used by Luke in Acts 15:39 to describe the “sharp contention” that broke out between Paul and Barnabas. This contention was so intense that at least temporarily severed their partnership in ministry.<sup>107</sup> It may sound counterintuitive to our ears, but we must make no mistake in this matter; Christian love must be provoked. Good deeds must be provoked. And we are the ones—all of us—who must give ourselves to provoking one another to love and good deeds.

During the pandemic, we recognized the extreme reality of this need, and we struggled to effectively provoke one another with what at times felt like we had one hand tied behind our back. Now that we are meeting together again—multiple times a week—the collective church must rediscover her place and her calling. Our members need to rediscover what it means to be devoted to the fellowship that is the church. We took it for granted that the church would always be here, and then we lamented the pain and loss we felt during the pandemic both when we were unable to meet and when we had COVID protocols. Did God use this experience to reawaken our zeal for his house in the way that Christ’s zeal for God’s house was provoked and roused when he saw how the people of his day had lost their way? God’s house was to be a house of prayer for all the nations; they had turned it into a marketplace and a den of thieves and robbers (Mark 11:15-17 and John 2:13-17). Where is our zeal for God’s house that is inspired by and matches Christ’s zeal? We are not to be slothful, lagging or lacking in zeal (Romans 12:11), yet this is where the church in America has lived for the past 25 years and more.

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<sup>107</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 256-7.

There can be no doubt that in the face of the extreme opposition and the logistical challenges of the first church in Jerusalem—no church buildings, no written collection of the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles in the form of the New Testament, no properties or centers of benevolence and charity, to name but a few of its disadvantages compared to the modern church—that this early church would have struggled to survive and would have made little to no impact on its world if the devotion of its members only matched the devotion of the typical American church member today.

It was not an officially recognized religion by the Roman Empire. It was a disadvantaged and persecuted movement; yet it thrived. This church thrived because the people “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42 NRSV). It thrived because the people responded to God’s presence and work among them and within them to join God in his work and mission in the world. They prioritized love and relationships to such an extreme that they sold their possessions and gave to anyone as they had need (Acts 2:44-45). And they gladly met together every day in the temple courtyard and in their homes (Acts 2:46). As the NRSV puts it, “they spent much time together.” There can be no doubt that the Lord was at work among them, as the last statement in this paragraph makes clear, “And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (NRSV).

The church in America is free to gather. For a long time, it has enjoyed many advantages and opportunities in our nation. But the church as a whole has neither been devoted to the Lord nor to the Lord’s fellowship. Like Martha, we have allowed ourselves to be worried and distracted by many things; we need to be like Mary and choose the thing that matters, the good portion that is the better part of life (Luke 10:41-42).

Ultimately the solution to what ails us is not to change our programs, change our methodology, change our message, or change our music. We need to change our hearts. Renewal and revival start with repentance; it starts with a change of heart. We need to seek of the Lord what God promised his people long ago through the prophet Ezekiel.

Two times God promised his people a new heart. “I will give them one heart and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God” (Ezekiel 11:19-20 NRSV). “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances” (Ezekiel 36:26-27 NRSV). In both instances, this involved bringing his people back together after they had been dispersed, not by their own choosing, but by the hand of God who had dispersed them in order to prepare them for this moment of redemption, revival and renewal. Another ancient text of Scripture that touches on the importance of a changed heart focuses on our part in the process. When God disperses his people and sends them away, he promises to bring them together again. “From there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul. In your distress, when all these things have happened to you in time to come, you will return to the LORD your God and heed him.” (Deuteronomy 4:29-30 NRSV).

We need to pray to our God for a new heart. We need to seek the Lord our God with all our heart and soul. We need to fully return to the Lord and heed his voice and the commands he has given us for our good (Deuteronomy 10:13).

## **What Was Learned from this Research Project**

The intention that an interactive congregational experience that aims both to gather meaningful information from the members and to generate hopeful anticipation and enthusiasm for its future is ambitious. This project succeeded in both goals, but the data gathered from the members was undeniably shaped by the process. For example, some valuable information was lost due to the inability to ask follow-up questions when responses did not engage with the question to answer it. Interviews conducted by individuals who had been coached and trained to ask the question again would have likely garnered additional meaningful data.

It is also highly likely that at least some responses were inevitably influenced by the responses of others. Whenever someone was the second or third person in a group to give a response to the question, in some instances, this latter response may have been unduly shaped or influenced by the earlier response(s). For example, in response to what was the hardest part of dealing with how the pandemic impacted the life of the congregation, one member said, “I supported the decision to temporarily shut down and the masks.” This was likely in response to others at the table who had indicated that the hardest part for them was disappointment in the decision to temporarily halt congregational gatherings and to include COVID protocols when we resumed.

Responses may have also been shaped simply by who else was at the table. Any given member may have responded differently if someone else had been sitting across from them at the table. The semi-public nature of this methodology undoubtedly impacted responses. On the other hand, hearing the responses of others may have sparked meaningful thoughts and responses by someone who would not have given the helpful and reflective answer they gave without this catalyst.

Future research projects will need to weigh the benefits and losses of this congregational interactive approach to seeking responses and data from members. Adjustments might also be made to the methodology. Instead of everyone coming together at the same time, a two or three-step approach where the researcher conducts the survey with an initial group of members, who in turn are coached and ready to ask the same questions in the same format with a similar group.

This project also validated the extreme importance of how each question in a research project is worded and framed. Several questions were unexpectedly dismissed by members because of an unexpected pushback against a word choice. In particular, the word “fear” was not well received by several members. A researcher may not always be able to anticipate and avoid these situations, but in this case the primary researcher was aware of this mindset and should have either chosen different terminology or included alternative language for anyone who did like the language of “fear.”

The question about motivation proved to be difficult for our members. It may have been because it was the last question, and everyone was ready to finish the morning and get on with their day. It may have been that many of our members do not know how to answer the question, at least not quickly and concisely in the matter of a few short minutes. This requires more time for reflection and self-analysis. Or, perhaps they are uncertain as to what it is that motivates them, or what it will take to motivate them, to wholeheartedly serve the Lord. It may even be that for some of us, we fear our true answer might be perceived as shallow. The things we believe ought to motivate us simply do not inspire us to take action. Naming the things that do move us to action may feel inappropriate or unspiritual.

But this is a vitally important question that needs to be asked again, in a different way. For our members to answer honestly will require vulnerability and transparency. The goal of the

question is self-reflection and self-analysis that hopefully would prove beneficial both to the individual members to recognize what moves and inspires them personally, and that might translate to helpful information for congregational leaders to know what especially moves and excites members to devote themselves to the work of the Lord. It is not intended as an assessment or barometer of spiritual maturity. It is simply a question of what motivates our people to give their time, effort, physical and emotional energy for the sake of others in the name of Jesus. It will not be surprising to learn that different people are motivated by different things.

Perhaps a better final question might have been one that was cut from the original list of possible questions. “How can the shepherds and ministers of Woodland West both pray for and encourage you in the coming weeks to embrace and pursue God’s call on your life in everything we have discussed today?” None of this is about going back to our former way of life because it was familiar and comfortable. Our brother Paul put it this way long ago:

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained (Philippians 3:12-16 NIV).

Throughout the pandemic experience there was one question that was stuck in my head, “What might God be up to?” The stories of Scripture show us an encouraging pattern of spiritual awakening, renewal and revival that so often follows trials and hardships. The stories of the past century in America do the same. Just as in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), God works in these hard things to bring us to ourselves, to open our eyes and make us realize just how much we and our world need the Lord. As the Lord was with Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego

(Daniel 3), our God was with us in the fiery furnace of the pandemic. The Lord has brought us through. The Lord has been faithful to us. Will we be faithful to the Lord?

The life of the original community of faith that consisted of followers of Jesus was radically disrupted over and over. It was disrupted by the shock of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It was disrupted by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. It was disrupted by the inclusion of Gentiles without any need for circumcision. It was disrupted by the persecution that quickly erupted against the church and the immediate dispersion of the church throughout the Roman Empire. A few years later it was disrupted again by a famine and the resulting economic hardship that came to Judea. And it was disrupted by the epic destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. In all these painful and potentially disorienting disruptions in the life of the church, God was at work within his people to sustain, shape, and strengthen their faith, and to guide them into a new kingdom of God reality. And God was at work among them to accomplish beautiful and wonderful things through them—their lives, their efforts, and their sacrifices. They lived in dark and difficult days, yet God did great and incredible things through these ordinary people of faith to bring hope and healing to our world. It is our hope and prayer that God has been and will do the same for us today.



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## APPENDIX A

### DOCTOR OF MINISTRY RESEARCH PROJECT — RANDY TODD

#### **Emerging From The Pandemic As A Community Of Faith: Assessing How The Life And Faith Of Woodland West Church Of Christ Has Been Shaped By The Pandemic And By God Through This Experience**

#### **INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM**

##### **Introduction:**

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating how the COVID-19 pandemic experience has been shaping the Woodland West Church of Christ and how God has been shaping and moving us through this experience to help us rediscover our higher calling in Christ. This study is being conducted by Randy Todd, a doctoral student in the Hazelip School of Theology at Lipscomb University under the supervision of Dr. Earl Lavender, a faculty member in the Hazelip School of Theology. You were selected as a possible participant in this research because you are a member of the Woodland West Church of Christ and volunteered to participate. Please read this form and ask questions before you agree to be in the study.

##### **Background Information:**

The global pandemic has impacted absolutely every aspect of human life and society. This, of course, includes the life and ministries of local churches and the practices of the Christian faith. The purpose of this study is to explore the process and effectiveness of how Woodland West Church of Christ has attempted to navigate these difficult days and is now attempting to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic experience and move forward as a congregation better and stronger than when we entered it. What have we learned or rediscovered about ourselves, our God, our faith, our commitments and priorities, and our calling in Christ? What have we sensed God doing among us? And how might these things inform and guide us as we move forward as a church?

Approximately 50-75 people are expected to participate in this research.

##### **Procedures:**

If you decide to participate in this research study, you will spend a Saturday morning together with your Woodland West church family asking and answering seven questions that aim to help us explore how we have been shaped by the pandemic experience. We will meet in the gymnasium to receive instructions and then gather up in small groups of three to begin the process of listening to one another's responses to the questions. Those listening to the responses will write these down in summary form. Sample answers from random small groups will be shared with the larger group before moving to the next question. The groups of three will be changed several times during this session to keep the interaction within each group fresh and engaging. After the discovery session concludes, the combined data from the answers in all the groups will be combined, sorted and analyzed for discernable trends and themes among the members of Woodland West.

## **Risks and Benefits:**

The study on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the life of Woodland West and the lives of its members potentially presents significant benefits for participants and poses several risks.

Participants will potentially benefit from the process of spiritual reflection together with other members of Woodland West. A primary aim of the study is to assess how the members of Woodland West have seen God at work in our lives during the pandemic experience. This includes how we sense that we—both as individuals and as a congregation—have been shaped by the testing of our faith through this experience. How has the pandemic shaped our hope for the future of this church?

Upon the completion of the study, this process of sharing and hearing the many stories of how God has been at work among his people at Woodland West has the potential of encouraging and igniting even more hearts to respond more fully to God's call on their lives, as well as to boldly move forward in our collective efforts together.

Finally, those who experience this discovery session together with their Woodland West church family may discover a deeper sense of appreciation for one another as servants of the Lord, a new source for mutual prayer and encouragement, as well as a renewed sense of the presence of God among us and within us.

These potential benefits should be measured against the possible risks that are inherent in this process.

The risk of COVID-19 exposure exists in every setting. Participants should follow CDC recommended protocols to reduce this risk. Risk to sickness and viruses can never be eliminated.

Depending on how difficult the pandemic experience has been for the participant and her or his family, it is possible that some participants may experience emotional stress in participating in this study—particularly in answering the questions associated with the study or simply anticipating how he or she will or should answer these questions about what has been especially difficult about the pandemic experience. Openly sharing one's story with someone else can bring healing and hope, but it may also initially bring emotional pain and trauma. The more emotionally vulnerable and at risk a participant is under normal circumstances of life, the more likely he or she is to be vulnerable and at risk in participating in this study.

Depending on the participant's previous experiences in openly discussing spiritual matters with others, there may be some discomfort and awkwardness in being open and honest about one's feelings and sense of God in his/her life. This may have the unintended consequence of creating feelings of embarrassment, vulnerability and/or inadequacy. The participant may fear that he/she may be perceived as unspiritual based on his/her answers to the discovery questions or may be especially uncomfortable based on who is in their group for any particular question.

To help reduce these emotional and relational risks, everyone will be empowered to form their own groups throughout the discovery session. Also, at any point in the during the discovery session, if the emotional discomfort becomes too great, the participant may choose either to refrain from answering a specific question or to withdraw from the study altogether.

Pastoral care, support and guidance from the shepherds or ministers will be provided for anyone

who feels they need someone to talk with after participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:**

Your answers will be immediately known to the small group of three with whom you have chosen to share your answers. Each group will be invited to share a quick summary of their discussion with the larger group in the room before we move to the next question. So, this is not an exercise in confidentiality in the context of the congregational discovery session. Each participant should take this into account as they share their answers with their group of three in this public context.

The research project aims to explore the collective data from the entire group of participants. Your responses to the questions will remain anonymous in that your name will not appear on the summary notes of your answers given. Only the people in your group of three will know that this was your answer. Consequently, in any written observations, evaluations, reports or publications based on the data collected from the congregational discovery session, your individual responses to the interview questions will be kept confidential. No one from the congregational research project will be identified or identifiable in these written documents.

While the researcher will not disclose your identity, other Woodland West members who participated in the congregational discovery session, and your friends outside of the congregation who know your God-stories, may be able to detect your voice in the chorus of stories and responses that flow from this research project. Any information obtained in connection with this research study that can be readily identified with you will be included in the final Doctor of Ministry project document only with your express permission in writing. A separate document will be provided to you at that time to indicate your permission.

While gathering and assessing the data from the research study, I will keep the discovery session notes and research results in a locked desk in my church office. Any digital notes will be kept on my personal password-protected computer in password-protected folders or files. I will finish analyzing the data by March 2022. At this point all original notes and identifying information that might be linked back to you will be either deleted or destroyed.

**Voluntary Participation:**

Participation in this research study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Woodland West Church of Christ or Lipscomb University in any way. You are also free to stop participating at any time for any reason without any penalty or consequences.

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

**Contact Person for Questions**

If you have any questions about this research project and what will be expected of you, please reach out to Randy Todd at 817.275.2657 ext. 102, or via email at [randytodd@wwcoc.org](mailto:randytodd@wwcoc.org).

**Statement of Consent:**

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read this information, your questions have been answered, and you are choosing to participate.

Please note, that even after signing this form, you may withdraw from the congregational study at any time.

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Signature of Participant

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Date

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Signature of Researcher

---

Date

## APPENDIX B



**WOODLAND WEST**  
CHURCH *of* CHRIST

3101 West Park Row Drive  
Arlington, TX 76013

January 7, 2022

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am writing to invite you to participate in a Day of Discovery, Renewal and Hope along with your fellow members of Woodland West Church of Christ. We will meet in the gym on Saturday, January 29 from 10 A.M. till noon to explore seven simple questions that aim to help us explore how the life and faith of Woodland West Church of Christ has been shaped by the pandemic experience and by God during the past two years.

This discovery session is an important part of my final Doctor of Ministry congregational research study at Lipscomb University. I am hopeful that this endeavor will prove to be encouraging and beneficial for everyone who participates. If you are willing and able, your participation will be greatly appreciated.

For the past year we have been saying to ourselves that we want to emerge better, stronger, together. This congregational research study is another step in that direction into our future.

If you have any questions, please let me know. Otherwise, I hope that you will be able to join me and your Woodland West family in this Day of Discovery.

Your servant and brother in Christ,

Randy Todd

## APPENDIX C

Email message sent to the church on January 13, 2022.



I am sending this email to invite you to participate in a Day of Discovery, Renewal and Hope along with your fellow members of Woodland West Church of Christ. We will meet in the gym on Saturday, January 29 from 9:30 A.M. till noon to explore seven simple questions that aim to help us explore how the life and faith of Woodland West Church of Christ has been shaped by the pandemic experience and by God during the past two years.

This discovery session is an important part of my final Doctor of Ministry congregational research study at Lipscomb University. I am hopeful that this endeavor will prove to be encouraging and beneficial for everyone who participates. If you are willing and able, your participation will be greatly appreciated. Please note that members must be at least 18 years old in order to be a part of this research study.

Once you know you want to be a part of this experience, please go ahead and register to let us know you are coming. This will help with organizing everything leading up to the event. Here is the link to register. (Or you can do this on the church app under the events tab.) <https://wwcc.churchcenter.com/registrations/events/1046050>

Thank you in advance!

Randy Todd

## APPENDIX D

# WWCC — First Sunday Back Together Plans

Members of Woodland West,

We are excited about the plan to come together again to worship as a church this Sunday, June 7!

Here is a reminder of both what to expect and what we are expecting from absolutely every person who chooses to attend worship in the foreseeable future.

As always, we want to stress that if you have a fever, a cough, or any other symptoms of sickness, or if you have recently been exposed to someone who tested positive for COVID-19, or if you are at high risk of serious consequences should you become ill with COVID-19, please stay home and stay safe, and protect others from the risk of getting COVID-19.

Thank you in advance for your cheerful cooperation! We are all looking forward to being together!

On behalf of all the shepherds and ministers,

*Randy, James C., and Trey*

## We Will Practice the Six-Foot Distance Rule at All Times

1. **We want everyone to maintain a six-foot distance from others at all times.** In the parking lots, in the lobbies, in the restrooms, in the hallways, and in the auditorium. Do your best to do your part.
2. **There will be a strict NO contact policy.** We are asking and expect everyone to abide by this temporary policy. This includes no shaking of hands, fist bumps, and hugging. This will feel awkward and inhospitable. But in the current situation, this is the hospitable thing to do. Keep reminding yourself that this is a temporary precautionary measure we need to do in the spirit of love and compassion for everyone we greet.
3. Everyone is encouraged to find appropriate ways to greet one another without hugs, handshakes, or other forms of contact. Use your voice, wave at people, give air high fives, and etc.

## Greeters Will Be Wearing Masks and Opening the Doors for Everyone

1. Greeters will open the doors for everyone and welcome you to the assembly.
2. Greeters will be wearing masks.

## **Wearing a Mask Is Recommended, but Not Mandatory**

If you have a mask and want to wear it, please do so—but we do not expect or require this of everyone. However, when we sing, we will expect everyone to be wearing a mask. If you do not have a mask, please do not sing.

## **We Will Not Be Serving Coffee**

1. To reduce the possibility of spreading germs through the contact of surfaces on cups, creamers, dispensers, and etc., we will not be serving coffee before or after our worship assemblies for the foreseeable future.
2. Please do not bring disposable items into the auditorium. If you bring your own coffee or other beverages into the building, please dispose of the cup in the trash cans in the lobbies before you enter the auditorium. We want to reduce and eliminate contact surfaces in the auditorium as a source of spreading germs.

## **We Will Have Ushers Assisting Everyone in Finding A Seat**

1. We will need everyone's full cooperation in practicing the six-foot guideline for seating. Please come ready to be cheerfully flexible in where you sit.
2. Do not expect to sit in your usual, preferred spot. We are limiting our seating to only half of our pews in the auditorium (28 of the 56 rows). Starting with the back row of every section, seating will be limited to every other row. It is doubtful that anyone will be sitting in their usual spot.
3. Household and family units will sit together, but there will need to be six feet of space between your family/household unit and the next person or group sitting on your pew.
4. If you need assistance in finding handicap accessible seating, please let an usher know.

## **We Will Sanitize the Building Each Week**

1. All hard surfaces of the lobbies, nursery and restrooms will be sanitized each week before we meet.
2. The pews in the auditorium will be sprayed with a mist sanitizer each week before we meet.
3. Hand sanitizer will be available in both lobbies.
4. We are removing all books, paper, and pencils from the pews for the foreseeable future as a way to reduce contact surfaces in the auditorium.



## **We Will Keep All the Doors to the Auditorium & Restrooms Open**

1. All the doors to the auditorium will remain open at all times during the gathering to eliminate the point of contact in opening and closing the door.
2. All doors to the restrooms will also remain open at all times. The entrances to all the restrooms restrict visibility in the same way as restrooms at an airport. Leaving the doors open eliminates the need for surface contact as you enter and leave the restroom.

## **We Will Keep the Kitchen, Gym, Fellowship & All Classrooms Closed**

1. Everyone is to remain in the auditorium, the two main lobbies, and the restrooms associated with these two lobbies.
2. The kitchen, gym, fellowship room and all classrooms will be closed and locked.
3. The small restrooms behind the auditorium will be locked and unavailable for use.

## **The Nursery Will Be Self-Serve**

1. The nursery will be sanitized before each Sunday assembly.
2. The nursery will be “self-serve” during this initial phase of coming together again as a church. If you need to use the nursery to change a diaper or to bring a crying baby out of the assembly, the nursery will be available to you.
3. You will need to remain in the nursery with your baby.
4. All toys and other non-essential items in the nursery have been removed in order to reduce the number of contact surfaces children and adults might come into contact with while in the nursery.

## **We Will Have An Interactive Teaching Moment With The Children**

Mr. Trey will have a teaching moment with the children each and every Sunday, but the children will remain in the pews with their families during this time.

## **All Other Children’s Ministries Activities Will Be Exclusively Online**

1. There will be no children’s ministries activities at the church building during the worship assembly.
2. Families are encouraged to bring their children, and the children will sit with their families throughout the worship assembly.
3. The children’s play area in the West Lobby will be closed for the foreseeable future.

4. Online resources include:

- **Mr. Trey's Pretty Good Bible Show**

A Daily Bible Study, Live Stream, Interaction and Life Application

Monday-Thursday, 10 a.m.

Watch live or available as a recording for whenever it's convenient for you.

<https://www.facebook.com/MrTreysPrettyGoodBibleShow>

Most videos are uploaded to YouTube within 48 Hours, if you don't have access to Facebook

- <https://bit.ly/PrettyGoodYoutube>

- **Family15** - An Interactive Family Bible Study and Activity - Every Weekend

- **ZOOM! Chat-N-Pray with Mr. Trey**

Wednesday, 7:00-7:40pm

<https://bit.ly/WWCC-KidzRule>

Meeting ID: [Left blank intentionally.]

Password: [Left blank intentionally.]

Trey Laminack's mobile phone number is: [Number removed to protect his privacy.] Parents and kids, feel free to call or text my cell anytime. — Mr. Trey

## We Will Use the All-In-One Communion Supplies for the Lord's Supper

1. We will have all-in-one individual communion supplies in both lobbies as you enter. The communion bread and cup will be inside a small Ziploc bag. Those putting these together will do this in a safe and clean manner.
2. These will be laid out on tables and clearly marked so that you can know how many cups are in the bag—1, 2 or 3. Take the bag(s) that has what you or your family needs. For example, if you need 5, take a bag with 2 and a bag with 3.
3. After the Lord's Supper is finished, everyone is to place their empty cup into the Ziploc bag and carefully seal it. When we are dismissed everyone is to carry their Ziploc bag to the lobbies to dispose of them in the trash cans.

## You Can Give Your Offering Online or In Person

1. We encourage everyone who can, to give online using Zelle. Go to [woodlandwest.org](http://woodlandwest.org) and click the "Online Giving" link at the top of the page. It is between "Prayer" and "Contact Us." This allows everyone to give through a "no-touch" process. Your bank has to use Zelle in order to do this. If your

bank does not use Zelle, you can simply use whatever online service your bank offers to pay bills as an electronic way to give.

2. If you are unable to give online, don't worry. You will be able to give at the church building on Sundays.

## We Will Distribute the Church Bulletin & Monthly Newsletter Via Email

1. Sunday bulletins will be digital only. These will be sent via email on the Friday before the worship assembly via the daily church email update.
2. If you have not yet registered to receive the daily church email update, send a request via email to be added to the distribution list. Send this request to [patriciasayen@wwcoc.org](mailto:patriciasayen@wwcoc.org).

## We Will Continue Our Online Worship Experience

We will begin livestreaming our worship assemblies each Sunday for those who are either unable or not yet comfortable returning to meet with the church.

## We Will Continue Our Online Bible Classes

1. Bible classes will continue online.
2. During the initial first phase of coming back together, we will limit our gatherings to worship assemblies only. There will be no Bible classes meeting at the church building.
3. See Children's Ministry section for details about online classes for the children.

## We Will Continue to Do Growth Groups Online with Video Calls

Growth Groups will continue to meet online through Zoom or whatever your group is using to do video gatherings.

## If You Have a Fever or Any Other Symptoms, Please Stay Home

