

STATE OF THE CHURCH – January 10, 2021

Remember how 2020 started? Great January. Starting our 5th month in our newly renovated worship center and lobby. Lots of momentum and excitement as we approached our GIC on February 26-March 1. Outstanding time of worship, fellowship and challenge alongside 35 missionary families. I go out of town that next Thursday with Janice to visit our daughter Lauren...Tim Wheat preaches that Sunday, March 8. And everything shuts down! Man, I don't know what you did Tim but don't do it again!

At that point we entered into a 9 and 1/2 months that is beyond anything we have ever had to deal with in the past. There was suffering, loss, hurt, grief and difficulty. Hardly anyone has been untouched personally or through a close friend or acquaintance. There were leadership challenges with all the uncertainty. The new information that was daily replacing the information of the day before made planning a nightmare.

I told our staff that during this time every plan we agree to is written on an Etch-a-Sketch because it could change within 24 hours...and that happened constantly. All of us were frustrated over the uncertainty and conflicting information coming from the medical community, the White House and the media. At times we did not know if we were more scared or more angry!

But 10 days ago the calendar turned and 2020 is in the rear view mirror. And the #1 description that is being given to the year 2020 is a "Dumpster Fire." And the overarching sentiment is good riddance. But not so fast.

Always remember that our God is sovereign and He is in control.

Early in Jesus' ministry after Philip met Jesus he found his friend Nathanael and told him, "*We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.*" Nathanael's response was, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" We can ask that same question, "Can anything good come out of 2020?" And I am standing here today to give you a resounding YES! And I can say yes because God is sovereign; God is in control; and He works all things together for good for those who are called according to his purpose.

Much of the New Testament with the Book of Acts and the Epistles were written during times of persecution and extreme difficulty.

In Jerusalem the Christians were losing their jobs, family bonds were severed, ostracized by society, financial hardships, and on top of all of this, there was a famine. But yet when we read the words of Paul, John, James and Peter we see God glorified, we see His faithfulness, we see His love and mercy and we are encouraged and motivated to live for Him. So yes good can come from trying times. And yes good did come from 2020.

Shades Mountain Baptist Church accomplished some amazing things these past twelve months and there were a number of moments where all we can say is, "God did it." So I want to review 2020 and give you the state of the church and then share about 2021 and a major step that we are going to take this year. You don't want to miss this! If you are watching online this is not the time to be multi-tasking; not the time to get up and wash the dishes...you just might miss something big!

Early in March when the pandemic reached Alabama, our staff met socially distanced in the Student Building. Chad and I led the staff meeting giving directions for next steps. Before the close of the meeting I laid out for our staff four things that we were to keep in mind throughout the pandemic regardless of its length. The first of April I shared in a video email with the church these same four guidelines as we traveled together in this pandemic.

- I. **Make wise decisions** – follow the CDC guidelines and try and stay healthy. A challenge to our staff and to our members.

We pledged to make wise decisions keeping in mind the health of our members and guests in every activity we planned.

1. Cautiously aggressive

We balanced the health concerns of COVID 19 with the admonition of ***Hebrews 10:24-25, "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."***

We suspended onsite worship gatherings on March 15. As the lockdowns ensued and the pandemic continued we wrestled with when and how to bring the church back on campus. We wanted to return to campus because we agreed that we are "***better together***" but when would be the best time and how do we prepare our facilities for this new environment?

We created two teams: ***The Better Together Staff Team*** and ***The Better Together Volunteer Team*** which was made up of members from diverse medical, media, educational and business backgrounds and represented different stages of life.

After multiple meetings we made the decision to return on campus in a phased approach. The first June 28 with no worship care for preschoolers. July 12 brought back Adult SS with no children. August 2 resumed Worship Care and September 13 resumed worship care and full SS.

Before we brought anyone back on campus, we adhered to our guideline of making wise decisions by implementing rigorous cleaning policies, social distance seating, and mask wearing. We changed a number of our Sunday morning procedures to be “no touch” and tried to create the safest environment possible...and so far we have been successful and we are carrying those same precautions and preparations into 2021.

2. Creatively adaptive

We had to move all our worship services to online. We didn't see this as a setback but as an opportunity to be creative; an opportunity to enhance the viewing of worship. So we used multiple locations inside the church and went offsite...including my house where we streamed our Easter service then a four-week sermon series. We even had some fun with Janice at the conclusion of my sermon on Philippians 4 with this outtake (video).

Michael, his staff and members of our worship praise teams recorded worship and praise songs from both the worship center and two offsite locations to give a high quality variety to our worship services.

Our Sunday School classes met on Zoom and then slowly began to meet together in person off site and then on campus.

I am so proud of our staff and our creative teams who kicked into high gear to make the most of a difficult situation. From a creative standpoint this was our church's finest hour.

Evidence of that was our Christmas Special Hope Is Alive. In August we were already looking toward December and realized we would not be able to present our annual Christmas by Candlelight. So the idea came to make a one hour Christmas special to be on a network broadcast and use it to help

support the Christian Service Mission. The production was professional; it was outstanding and the reach was beyond anything we have ever done before with close to 50,000 viewers as compared to normal CBC of 4000. At least 50,000 heard a gospel presentation and raised at least \$25,000.

II. Maintain Fellowship

Chad came up with the idea for all our staff to contact every household regularly during the lockdown. Lisa Davis took on this task and divided out the names of every household among our staff...about 20 per staff. Used old fashioned phone calls and if that didn't work emails. Did for April and May.

Sunday School classes were incredible and were relentless in staying in touch with their class members. Several classes met twice each week – once for Bible study and again for fellowship. From reports I heard they engaged in some competitive Trivia games and other games and even had an in-house scavenger hunt. When the lockdown ended some of our groups met at the pavilion, designated parking lot areas, and city parks. Some classes connected with their GIC missionary and had them join in SS thru Zoom. Shades did a great job maintaining fellowship in a socially distant world.

III. Minister to Others

We were not going to hunker down and just focus on ourselves. We were going to keep our heads up and actively seek out ministry opportunities. Our goal was not just to take care of existing partnerships but to look for new opportunities.

School adoption teams. We had 6 schools at the start of the year and added Pizitz Middle School. Now ministering to over 600 teachers and 5000 first through 8th graders. In these 9 1/2 months our teams provided meals, gift bags, snack breaks and other items of support and encouragement to let the teachers and students know that we love them and so does Jesus.

- In April we provided 50 individual coffee makers to the COVID ward for quarantined doctors.
- Urban Purpose Food Drive – approx. 75 members in SS classes, in April and May served over 1,500 lunches
- Food Drive-thru. Over 350 cars drove through and we collected 12,561 pounds of food. We invited 4 other churches to participate and the total given by all of us was 27,338 pounds of food. **[PICTURES]**

- In May our Community Events Team and Encouragement Team provided lunch, notes and support for over 70 workers at the Diversicare Nursing Home in Riverchase.
- In June we got connected with Glenwood Autism and Behavioral Health Center and provided over 500 pints of frozen custard from Culvers for all the staff and residents.
- In July we partnered the Guthrie's Chicken Fingers restaurant at UAB and we provided lunch for 50 ER staff members at UAB Hospital.
- In late August-early September we provided several meals for the Central Arkansas Bears football team while they stayed in Birmingham before they played UAB on September 3. We provided breakfast for the team Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, and on Tuesday night David Phillips and a team of helpers held a cookout for the team on our campus. One of the assistant coaches for Central Arkansas is Ryan Howard, a former Shades member. There were approximately 110 players, coaches and support staff in the group from Central Arkansas. I got to share a gospel message.
- Our First Responders Team provided personalized Christmas baskets for every Vestavia Hills police officer and fire fighter and all the administrative personnel in those departments – approximately 215 people. Each basket included some snack items, hand sanitizer and a Christmas devotional booklet from the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. **MINISTER TO OTHERS**

IV. Make Jesus Known

We did not know the magnitude but we did know there would be people who would die from COVID 19 and sadly many would be separated from God for eternity. The urgency to share the gospel was heightened even as the challenge was more difficult. We were not able to take any mission trips to physically put boots on the ground to support our church planters in North America or our partners internationally. But that didn't deter Mike Lazenby and Tim Wheat.

Mike developed Missionary Care teams made up of over 50 Shades members whose purpose is to communicate regularly with the missionaries overseas who were sent out from Shades, and to support them spiritually and emotionally. Missionaries who engaged in over 1800 gospel conversations and trained hundreds of nationals to do the same.

Tim did “Coaching and Care” calls for 12 church planters throughout the pandemic. For many we were their lifeline financially, emotionally and spiritually. And we heard of some ways that God moved in 2020.

One of our partner church plants is David Pothier and LaChapelle in Montreal, Canada. LaChapelle is restricted and can't have small groups meeting in their homes. Their assembly hall gatherings are limited to 25 people. Yet one weekend in early December they baptized 21 people by setting up 21 different services. Each person being baptized would gather with their family and friends in groups of 15-20. **[FIRST BAPT. PIC]** After they were baptized, they would drain the baptistery...clean it...refill it and have the next one. **[NEXT PIC]** In late December they did the same thing for an additional 15 people. PTL!

Laurie Forester on our CLC staff:

14 years ago my twin sister and I came to faith in college and started praying for our older sister Amy. Over the last 14 years she's walked through times of doubt and disbelief, and she found things of this world to satisfy her. We often times brought up Jesus in our conversations and tried to point her to Scripture, but she inevitably continued walking in her own life and was not interested. In 2015 she hit rock bottom when our mom passed away and became so angry with God that she closed off any conversation we tried to have about faith. She watched my sister and me cling to our faith through the loss of our mom, and she continued to hear our stories of mission trips we'd taken and the work I get to do through ATB and Kids Kamp. She slowly became more intrigued by what kept our spirits high and how we could find joy despite such loss.

Amy began listening to Christian radio stations, and she started asking questions about what specific lyrics meant. This led to her asking about stories in Scripture that she heard referenced in the songs. As we talked more about the songs, I could tell her heart was yearning for more. In early 2020 when Kobe Bryant died it really hit home with her knowing he was so young and leaving behind his wife and kids. She wanted to know he was in Heaven and she began praying for his family. She found a church that she started attending (in Kentucky where she lives), and she loved the pastor! She would call some Sundays and tell us what she learned and asked questions that she didn't quite understand.

Around this time is when COVID started ramping up, but she still wanted to hear from the pastor so she watched church online for those few months. She started reading the Bible daily during quarantine along with watching the church online and she began praying for God to show her that He was looking out for her. Once the church resumed in person again, she attended a class that taught the basics of Christian faith, and she truly learned who Jesus was and the price he paid for her sins to be forgiven. In September she prayed during a church service to place her trust and faith in Christ because she knew she couldn't make it through this world on her own. The Lord has taught me to persevere in prayer for those far from God to be saved, even when it takes 14 years! And even during COVID in 2020!

V. Magnanimous in Giving

Giving is never a matter of circumstances; it is a matter of commitment.

[GIVING SLIDES]

Nepal Bible translation – Just finished our 7th year. Compiled an alphabet for each language; completed dictionaries and glossaries. Teacher training so that they could better educate children and taught them how to do Bible Storying. Translated Genesis and 85% of the New Testament in 6 languages representing 1,080,000 people who have never heard the bible are now able to get it in their heart language! This is equal to the size of Birmingham-Hoover metro area!

Makhmali village in Nepal only allows people from their society to enter. One pastor came by and they welcomed him. He preached the gospel from the Book of Genesis printed in their language and distributed 25 copies. They said, *“Until today no none shared with us about this good thing, it is really a very beautiful thing and come and visit us again.”*

McElwain Miraculous adoption – The \$1 million due diligence and the reduced spending budget. Only church in Birmingham who could do this.

2021 REFOCUS

Since March 2020, for most of us our focus has mainly been on surviving the pandemic, responding to constant change, learning and adapting to new technology, adjusting to social distancing and wearing masks,

enduring a contentious election season and longing for the day when things settle down into some sort of normalcy. With so much focus on these things, for most of us there has been very little, if any, focus on the Great Commission and reaching our world with the Gospel.

2021 it is time to “**REFOCUS**”. Getting our eyes off of ourselves and our situation and refocusing on growing as a disciple and reaching our world for Jesus. Our mission statement says, "Sending transformed people to influence their world for Christ."

We are to be “transformed” – eyes are on God

We are “sending/influence” – eyes on others

As we navigate through 2021 we will be:

- Pairing down the church calendar
- Ruthlessly evaluating every program and ministry
- Growing deeper and going bolder