



In Pursuit of a Bold Vision

Session

Towson Presbyterian Church

5/28/2021

Introduction

A bit over two years ago, Session released its [2018 Visioning Report](#) that created four new initiatives for the church to live into: sharing the Good News (evangelism), adult spiritual formation, family and intergenerational ministries, and communications. The report also established important goals and metrics to be achieved by the end of 2020, as TPC pursued the Spirit in these new areas of focus (metrics included increasing worship attendance, new members, small group and church school participation, social media outreach, and more).

With thanks to God, TPC was well on its way to meeting or exceeding each goal when Covid-19 hit, causing the closure of the church facility, and what was expected to be the cessation of significant momentum the church had been experiencing up to that point.

Leadership was deeply disappointed, but immediately got to work seeking to lead TPC through a physical separation that would last far longer than expected.

The most immediate and pressing issues became studying the pandemic to develop a healthy response for our community of faith, while also working to create as many pathways for connection, mission, and ministry as possible.

It wasn't easy, nor was it always smooth. But because of the remarkable faithfulness and perseverance of TPC's membership, and the undeniable power and presence of the Holy Spirit, TPC was able to adjust, evolve, and even begin grow during the pandemic. In fact, Session noticed healthy evolutions that seemed to give old ministries new life. Brand-new ministries began sprouting up in unexpected ways. And, perhaps most notably, the church's ability to grow disciples and proclaim God's love didn't shrink amid the pandemic as expected, but actually expanded.

So in January of 2021, Session pivoted from its focused work on leading TPC through the pandemic, and began discerning what TPC might learn from the pandemic. What's more, Session began exploring how TPC might be called to apply these new lessons amid our call to grow God's kingdom of inclusive love, curious faith, and deep and abiding compassion.

Lessons Learned During the Pandemic

Lesson 1 – The Church Does Not Need a Facility to be the Church

The Church isn't a building, but a people. Of course, we've long known this (intellectually, if not practically). But the pandemic forced us to actually demonstrate this aspect of our faith. And Towson Presbyterian Church's membership proved this truth in spectacular ways: from worship and small group participation, to finding a way to bring music and children's ministry to life, to expanding the church's mission and outreach in creative, life-giving ways!

Lesson 2 – Virtual Community is Real Community

Across the past decade, TPC has increasingly engaged in social media and utilizing a well-designed website. But before the pandemic, the church had never sought to truly form, grow, or develop a virtual space (e.g. internet or social media) *for the purpose of gathering people in*

worship, ministry, or mission in that virtual space. Of course, the pandemic immediately changed that, as the only space the church was permitted to gather folks was, in fact, virtual. In doing so, we have learned how accessible and convenient virtual space can be for people with busy schedules (or who live out of the area). Many voices expressed appreciation that virtual space made worship, small groups, or committee meetings more accessible. Even more than this, though, we learned how powerful the connections and formation can be within a virtual setting.

Lesson 3 – The Church is Called to the Virtual

Amid the lessons learned above, Session began discerning the Church's call to pursue the virtual realm. Because *the call of discipleship entails engaging people where they are*—rather than where we would hope or prefer them to be—the Church must recognize that an increasing number of people not only engage in virtual realms, but prefer doing so. Put bluntly, people are not gathering in town squares; people are gathering on the internet and social media. Because that is where they are, that is where the Church is called to go.

Lesson 4 – The Physical Remains Essential

Make no mistake, leadership is convicted that that the Church must significantly improve its ability to connect with and engage people in virtual community. That does not mean, however, that in-person ministry is any less essential to the life of the Church or God's kingdom. The virtual realm is to be pursued not instead of or before in-person community, but simply in addition to.

Lesson 5 – Parents are Children's Primary Faith Formers

While the Children & Family Ministries Committee emphasized this truth long before the pandemic arrived, the pandemic brought this truth into even clearer focus as church school went virtual, and parents needed to take a more active role in their child's church school experience this year. To be sure, the Church's role in children's and youth's faith formation is vital! But to be as formational as possible, these ministries must be based, first, in family ministry. As such, the church must grow both family and parent ministries that facilitate faith conversations between parents and children/youth, while helping parents feel comfortable and equipped exploring faith with their child(ren).

Lessons Applied

Virtual Ministry is Here to Stay

Even when TPC returns to full, unrestricted indoor gatherings, virtual ministry is far too valuable to discard. As such, Session and committees are actively working on expanding TPC's virtual presence and platforms, planning for a new programmatic year in 2021-2022 that will entail full offerings of both virtual and in-person ministries.

This means TPC will begin offering both in-person and virtual small groups; in-person and virtual missional opportunities; in-person and virtual worship opportunities; in-person and virtual missional opportunities; and more! Stay tuned!!!!

Staff Expansion

To facilitate these new avenues ministry, Session has expanded the job descriptions of three staff members.

Director of Music, Stephen Harouff, will move from 32 hrs./week to full-time ministry! He will continue to lead all the music ministry with which TPC is currently blessed, while spending newly allotted time leading spiritual formational opportunities based in music and song. Offerings will include small groups, livestreams, and more!

Director of Children & Family Ministries, Jenness Hall, will increase from 24 to 30 hours./week as she becomes TPC's **Director of Children, Youth, & Family Ministries**. Amid this additional role, Jenness will begin working with Pastor Joel Strom on a weekly basis to expand TPC's youth ministry. To be clear, Sunday evening youth group (with dinner, formation, and games) will not change or move. Rather, new components will be added and offered to TPC's youth ministry, so that TPC's ministry with youth is not limited simply to Sunday nights.

As noted above, **Pastor Joel Strom** will begin working with Jenness in an exciting expansion of youth ministry next programmatic year. But that's not all! Joel will also begin working with Jenness and the Children, Youth, and Family Ministries Committee to bring significant evolutions to TPC's Family Ministry, as TPC grows in the conviction that a fulfilling children or youth ministry requires an engaging family ministry that equips and nurtures parents. Joel will also continue facilitating the great ministry of TPC's Adult Spiritual Formation Committee, as they work to expand small groups into both physical and virtual spaces; and facilitating the wonderful and life-giving ministries of the Mission & Outreach Committee

Session has also created two brand-new positions: a full-time Director of Communication & Connections, and a part-time Administrative Assistant.

The full-time **Director of Communications & Connections** will create, curate, and disseminate TPC's communications to both members and the greater community. In addition to traditional print publications, significant work will be done expanding TPC's communication in the virtual realm by expanding the church's social media presence, online offerings, video capability, podcast subscriptions, and more. Stay tuned!

A part-time **Administrative Assistant** (15 hrs./week) will join the staff later this summer to assume important administrative roles in support of both current and new ministries that staff and committees will be leading.

Sanctuary Audio-Visual Upgrade

Noting the importance of virtual worship and the essential role that livestreaming will play in the future of TPC's Sunday morning services, Session has approved a significant audio-visual upgrade to the sanctuary's equipment. New equipment, including three cameras, six screens, four new wireless mics, three new condenser mics, and significant livestreaming equipment will be installed in the sanctuary in July, 2021. Please [click here to learn more](#).

Sanctuary Ventilation Renovation

Having learned the limitations of the sanctuary's HVAC (which relies almost entirely on recycled air that is not filtered via MERV 13 or HEPA filtration), and deeply valuing the role of in-person worship in the sanctuary, Session approved a major renovation to the sanctuary's ventilation system. Specifically, a new outdoor air-handler will be installed with chases running under the sanctuary floor along the sides. Eleven registers will be installed and connected to the ductwork running through the chases, thereby bringing in a significant amount of outdoor air to dramatically improve the sanctuary's ventilation.