

**ReGathering Stories: Lessons Learned**

Across the CMBA churches have implemented similar plans leading to ReGathering, using a phased approach with differing time frames for each level of reopening. At press time, some have been meeting in person for weeks and even months, while others are happy to continue offering online worship services for the foreseeable future. COVID-19 has forced churches to learn many important lessons and the ReGathering experience is no exception.

Ethan Brown has been pastor of Stephen Greene Baptist in Fairfield County for almost two years. His church resumed live worship services on June 7 with strict social distancing and now requires that masks be worn to obey a city ordinance. He admits his seminary studies did not include pandemic preparation, but the experience has validated the importance of long-term ministry goals and vision casting.

“In a lot of ways this virus has stripped away things we were doing that weren’t really accomplishing anything. It has forced us to return to our mission and focus on things that are actually important,” he says.

Integrating online and physical services through livestream has been one important area of focus, something Brown sees as unifying to the church body during this time. Another focus has been member care, as the Stephen Greene staff first reviewed an outdated roster and then reached out to individuals and families by phone. A member built an outdoor wooden Hunger Ministry Box that the church keeps stocked with non-perishable and fresh food items as a new ministry to the community. The church monitors what foods need to be replenished and have given away nine Bibles through the box.

“We need to invest in people. These close relationships that you rely on are so vitally important now,” Brown says.

According to Pastor Michael McCoy of St. Mark Baptist, the personal touch of ministry has been something he has missed deeply during the pandemic. His church has not ReGathered and, with no immediate plans to resume, he recognizes it will be awhile before familiar aspects of ministry return. Like other pastors, McCoy has been forced to think of other ways to pray with the sick or comfort grieving members.

“My main struggle has been preaching to and pastoring a group of people I can’t see. I’m not a sit-down pastor behind the door or behind the pulpit, I’m a hands-on pastor. It’s been difficult and stressful for me. You want to be there for your people. I tell them to be safe and vigilant, but I have to be safe and vigilant also,” McCoy says.

According to Jacob Helsley, pastor of Blaney Baptist in Kershaw County, his church is also successfully navigating the first phase of ReGathering. As community infection reports recently increased the church has seen a slight decrease in worship attendance, and some members continue to worship exclusively online. Like other CMBA churches, Helsley says digital awakening has been a lesson his church has learned.

“Personally, God has reawakened me to the distinctiveness of Christianity, the beauty of the gospel and helping my people see that as well. We are grace-made people, which means somewhere in our lives together we have to have a place and posture to receive what only Jesus gives,” Helsley shares.

He encourages CMBA pastors to embrace God’s leadership in their church’s unique journey right now, pointing to the freedom found in asking Him “what do you want me to do with this group of people right now? God doing something new – so then, if it’s for His glory, whatever we have to weather is worth it.”

Pastor Donnie Chambers of Red Hill Baptist in lower Richland County is also taking a cautious approach to ReGathering. His church has tentative plans to reopen in September but may push that date into the New Year. Red Hill Baptist members remain engaged and report that they are content with livestream worship.

“It is amazing that the virus hasn’t dampened the spirit of the congregation, in fact their spirit has been greater. Our finances are better than before the virus, too. Members understand that the church is looking out for the best interests of everyone and they trust us in decision making,” Chambers says.

In terms of lessons learned, Chambers says he would have started livestreaming services sooner. He has also become more proactive with planning during the pandemic. More people are now involved in decision making and coordinating member care, and some precautionary practices may be permanently in place at the church. God has also allowed some lessons to change this pastor’s heart.

“God has taught me about stronger faith. Pastors have faith but until it’s been tested, and you have to trust in the Lord, you learn the true understanding of that faith and trust. Red Hill has also been such a great comfort to me in leading and directing during this pandemic, I haven’t experienced any burdens regarding the congregation,” Chambers says of the support he receives.

Shandon Baptist debuted many changes with its first indoor gathering on July 12. Executive Pastor Scott Kelly reports added safety measures include service reservations, a request to wear masks and changes to how members can enter and exit the worship facility. Recognizing the fluid nature of ReGathering, Kelly says staff have corporately been operating under the theme “hold it loosely.”

“We will continue to do preproduced worship services through the end of July and the live services, then in August we will start streaming services. We are taking every precaution and are prepared to shut down at the last minute,” Kelly says.

ReGathering services have gone well at Kilbourne Park Baptist, which began meeting together for live worship on Father’s Day. Some ministries have resumed but the congregation has many cautions in place. They also report roughly three times the number of online viewers than they regularly see during normal worship services.

“Before ReGathering we heard repeatedly that people were ready to get back together. One of the greatest things from this experience has been the greater appreciation of the gathered church and being able to worship together as a community of believers. That was greatly missed by our people,” says Pastor Terry Smoak.

Kilbourne Park Baptist was pursuing a revitalization effort through the CMBA before the COVID interruption. Smoak looks forward to the congregation resuming that process and seeing what God has in store for his congregation post-pandemic. “We are doing the best we can do with God’s help and with the resources we have,” he says.

Visit [www.columbiametro.org](http://www.columbiametro.org) for additional ReGathering resources.