

**ReGathering Stories: Opening Perspectives**

As COVID-19-related concerns forced the sudden stop of in-person worship services in March, churches began planning and discussing issues related to ReGathering. CMBA resources were immediately available to help churches prepare for closures, produce livestream or prerecorded worship service options, begin incorporating safety measures and start planning for the eventual day when members could meet again for live worship. This ReGathering journey has been unique to each CMBA church as they consider congregational and community needs.

This article is the first in a series aimed to share stories from a variety of CMBA churches – those of different sizes, locations across the Midlands and in different stages of the ReGathering process. The following pastors share about their church’s planning process and experience leading up to Phase One of ReGathering. There is no “one right” method or timeframe to ReGather, but sharing stories and information can be helpful to churches at every point in the decision-making process.

**Beulah Baptist Church**

Beulah Baptist held livestream services for 12 weeks before ReGathering for in-person worship on June 7. New Sunday morning procedures include attendees being greeted by members who are medical professionals who inquire about exposure to anyone sick and other volunteers offer hand sanitizer and masks before ushers lead them to a seat in the sanctuary. Members register online ahead of the service so staff can plan for seating, keep attendance and, as Pastor Cameron DeBrew points out, use if contract tracing is ever needed.

“We have a three-phase plan and are still on Phase One, which is worship only and distanced while in the sanctuary. We have had between 70-75 each week, compared to our normal 100-110,” Cameron explains.

Beulah’s advisory team has worked with the pastoral staff through video conference calls since the beginning to make decisions about ministry during the closure and regarding the church’s phased reopening. Cameron says the team continues to meet weekly with staff to debrief about the previous Sunday’s service and on ways they can improve the experience.

While planning for ReGathering Cameron shares it was helpful to survey members about their comfort levels on topics like meeting in person, wearing a mask and even seating locations within the sanctuary. During the closure Sunday School teachers met with their classes via video conferencing. Leading up to the first live service, Beulah held outdoor Wednesday evening Bible studies and prayer times and welcomed members to participate at their own comfort level.

“Some chose to stay in their cars, others used chairs and we spread out across the parking lot. It was encouraging to just be together and see each other’s faces again,” Cameron says.

Having ReGathered for more than a month now, Cameron says members are abiding by the rules and being careful. Those who have returned say they are comfortable with safety measures that are in place. Others report they are close to feeling ready to return to services, and there is still a segment that Cameron knows will not likely return any time soon.

“Within recent weeks we have seen a community presence of the virus and we realize it is no longer a disease that’s ‘out there,’” he says.

**St. Andrews Baptist Church**

“I’ve learned that church is bigger than our practice of church. When the things that are familiar and routine and feel at home to us are taken away by circumstances, there still is a way for God’s people to worship and minster. That’s been an eye-opening discovery,” says Pastor Dee Vaughan of his personal experience of shepherding during this season.

St. Andrews’ story begins like many others, in that they successfully uploaded prerecorded services for several months before choosing a graduate celebration service as a “soft reopening.” Graduates and their families were carefully spaced throughout the sanctuary on the last Sunday in May while other church members watched the service via livestream. The following week they held the first service open to all members comfortable attending in person, adjusting several regular practices like removing hymnals and not passing the offering plate. About 80 members were there, roughly one-third of regular attenders. Then the virus hit too close to home.

“We saw that numbers were rising, so our staff reassessed and decided that on-campus services wouldn’t be safe for the congregation yet. I wrote members that week and made plans to record services again. We have many senior adults and other high-risk members, and many expressed gratitude for that safety measure,” Dee recalls.

Then a staff member tested positive for COVID-19 and had significant symptoms for more than a week. Thankfully, Dee and other staff members tested negative after the exposure but the experience created a new perspective on the ReGathering timeline.

“The situation became more personal. It becomes a little more real when it’s someone you work with and love that is sick. But it got inside of our staff, and that made us all realize how vulnerable everyone is,” he says.

St. Andrews has not set a new date to ReGather, and the staff plans to continue loading prerecorded services until community circumstances improve. Dee says the church’s praise team and technical volunteers have worked hard during the last few months to be prepared for several planned livestream services leading up to the official ReGathering services, and that they plan to offer livestream moving forward now that they’ve discovered several homebound members can participate that way.

“We have learned that when circumstances dictate, we can learn new ways to serve that we never thought we’d do. I’ve also learned to plan more humbly. I’m realizing there are times in life that are driven by circumstances changing and without my control. We’re having to live on manna and learning to trust God in our plans,” he says.

**Temple Zion Baptist Church**

Pastor Andre Melvin says his church has taken an extremely cautious approach to ReGathering. Shortened livestream services are produced at the church with a handful of musicians and media team members along with Andre sharing a brief sermon. Church leaders meet regularly to discuss ReGathering plans which will be based heavily on Centers for Disease Control guidelines and community testing numbers.

“There has been mixed feedback from our members about in-person services, and a lot of members are comfortable waiting. I am an African-American pastor of a predominately African-American church, and we are taking into account health issues and our seniors who are comfortable being at home and safe. We all miss the fellowship, which is the challenge. They now have a greater and new appreciation for coming to church to worship,” he says.

Temple Zion has worked hard to maintain a sense of connection during this time. There have been home food deliveries and drive-by meal distributions held at the church parking lot, where members remain in their cars until food is delivered to them. Wednesday Zoom prayer and Bible study services are well attended, and Andre creatively keeps a Thursday Bible study going by writing out the messages which are then printed and delivered to most of the senior members. A few times a month Andre records his sermons in an audio file for members without online access to receive by email. An administrative assistant has played these files over the phone for several senior members as well.

“I’m learning that ministry can be done differently. It’s been a challenge as pastors moving into this pandemic and sheltering in place. The question was how to do ministry if we’re all at home? We had to learn that ministry still takes place but just in different ways, even in a pandemic. I feel like I’ve been busier now than I ever have been, which is ironic,” Andre says.

**Harmony Baptist Church**

Close to 60 people attended Harmony Baptist’s first ReGathering service on June 7. Numbers have been smaller since then, but Pastor Daniel Griffin says this may be due to concerns about the community spread of COVID-19. There have been known exposures to the virus within the church family but so far no one there has tested positive. The church is doing its best to navigate this new reality.

“We’ve learned it’s hard to get people to alter habits, so we gently remind everyone to keep a distance,” Daniel says of Sunday morning services.

Harmony operates with safety measures in place, including hand sanitizer, taped pews and no offering plates. Masks are optional and mostly worn by older members. The service is shorter than normal with minimal singing and hymn words shown on the screen instead of using hymnals. Daniel is thankful for members’ faithful giving and says one of the biggest surprises during this season has been online viewership.

“We have probably doubled or tripled the number of people watching our service online. Some older members have joined Facebook just to watch,” he reports.

**Winnsboro First Baptist Church**

“We never stopped meeting for worship when COVID-19 struck. We just immediately moved to an outdoor worship model,” says Pastor Craig Bailey, who has previous experience coordinating drive-in church services.

It helps that Winnsboro First’s front parking lot and lawn are ideal for this type of service. They resumed indoor worship on June 7 while continuing to offer the drive-in service option at an earlier time. Members seem to prefer the outdoor option and bring their lawn chairs, snacks and occasionally some pets.

“This Phase One approach will continue at least until the end of August with the three options of watching the message only on YouTube, the drive-in service at 9:30 a.m. or the indoor service at 11 a.m. If all goes well, Phase Two will add some limited activity for children and youth and a return to a regular Wednesday service, but without a meal,” he says.

Winnsboro First offered video conferenced adult Sunday School until mid-June, when they began holding a coed class in the church gym between the two worship services. No children and youth classes have resumed, but LifeWay materials have been made accessible for them online. Craig says many changes have been made to the campus and worship services to accommodate safety concerns, including pre-packaged elements for the Lord’s Supper.

“We are finding two groups are slow to return. Many of our older members are staying home, especially those who have been through cancer treatments or have conditions that weaken their immune system. The other group is parents with small children, who are almost as fearful as the elderly to expose their kids,” he says.

For information and resources for churches regarding safety and ReGathering planning, visit [www.columbiametro.org](http://www.columbiametro.org).