

**ReGathering and Future Forecasting**

This is the final installment of a three-part series sharing how CMBA churches have [planned](https://www.columbiametro.org/regathering-stories) for ReGathering, valuable [lessons](https://www.columbiametro.org/lessons-learned/) learned and, now, how some are looking to position themselves for ministry in the coming fall and winter months. The only predictable thing about COVID-19 has been its unpredictability, including how it is affecting nearly every aspect of church planning and calendaring. Many CMBA churches are reporting an openness to how God might lead their congregation in new and different ways moving forward.

“There’s a time for caution but it can’t be an excuse to not be faithful to what God has called us to do. We are not allowing caution give way to fear. I believe there is more at stake than what meets the eye right now. We need to do everything we can to love our neighbors and love the people around us. We can’t be hap-hazard and disregard the wisdom of distancing and using safety measures, but at the same time there is a greater call that we need Jesus. And we need Jesus together,” Pastor Jacob Helsley says of holding worship services at Blaney Baptist.

As successful as ReGathering phasing has been across the CMBA, a resurgence of the virus and the impact of the regular flu season are potential threats to the start of the new church calendar year. Many pastors have indicated a reliance on current medical advice and how infection cases are trending for their decision making. Pastor Clay Smith says Alice Drive Baptist in Sumter will be closely watching decisions regarding non-essential businesses being allowed to remain open.

“If the death rate rises and the governor orders a shut down of restaurants, etc., we will most likely move back to offering online only,” he adds.

Blaney Baptist has a plan in place to make last-minute decisions in response to heavier virus activity in the surrounding Kershaw community. Helsley admits the church prefers to continue meeting in person and move forward in its phased ReGathering plans but could increase physical distancing by lowering the number of worshippers to each service while increasing its digital presence.

Pastor Ethan Brown of Stephen Greene Baptist says his church’s plan is similar, adding the philosophy is to “dip our toe in water and pull back if needed.” Pastor Michael McCoy of St. Mark Baptist is taking a more cautious approach and says his congregation is supportive of the pace and appears to be thriving through current worship experiences. In addition to services uploaded to Facebook and YouTube, McCoy has been leading Sunday School, Bible study and prayer through conference lines offered each week Monday through Saturday.

“We have not met in person yet and I do not know when that will be. We will wait to hear from the Lord and from the doctors and scientists. The congregation is loving online worship, and we are getting people to participate that normally wouldn’t be doing this. Everybody is comfortable waiting and seeing how things go,” McCoy says.

Some churches are using this time to evaluate ministries and make tough decisions about which elements of pre-COVID “normal church” might remain moving forward. Many pastors have mentioned marginal ministries like Wednesday night meal service are in jeopardy. Alice Drive Baptist is reallocating some staff positions in support of emerging ministries like its online church campus and will likely not resume printing bulletins once fully reopened.

“We must accept the Church is in a ‘re-launching’ time. It will take time to rebuild our on-campus attendance. I feel like the ‘nice to have’ will be replaced by the ‘must have,’” Smith says.

Decisions being made at Shandon Baptist echo this idea, as Executive Pastor Scott Kelly shared about issues they are facing. As giving has decreased, the team is taking steps to “reengineer and reorganize” existing programs and ask healthy questions about the future state of leadership and the post-virus church. Kelly says the process has helped align resources and staff with mission-essential activities.

“Doing this has given us bandwidth to refocus efforts on what we feel is important to Shandon Baptist for the next five years,” Kelly says.

If Gateway Baptist sees increased community viral activity this fall it would likely adjust ministries to children and youth, but it plans to continue both online and in-person worship services at this point. Pastor Don Brock says staff has already streamlined programs, activities and events in an effort to be intentional with time and resources. The focus is squarely on creating opportunities for community connections.

“We had many salvations during our online only time and are seeing our people reevaluate their priorities and focus. Personally, I see this as a gift to the church. It’s a great opportunity to realign the church and to adjust the DNA of our church,” Brock says.

Fort Clark Baptist members have been worshipping through livestream and drive-in services, and Pastor John Roberts plans to continue this until state authorities lower the risk level for COVID-19. During the closure the church has collected protective materials like masks and gloves, hand sanitizer, touchless thermometers and cleaning disinfectants. The church does plan to communicate soon with members about what ReGathered worship will look like when it is safe to do so. In the meantime, Roberts says he has “seen God at work during this season by allowing us to minister in new ways.”

Regarding the presence of livestream worship moving into the fall and beyond, Brown reminds pastors to model appropriate guidelines and other requests the church may be communicating. For example, he wears a mask until he approaches the podium to speak. Brown also offers a word of encouragement to churches of any size as they evaluate livestream data.

“Don’t get discouraged when you look at the numbers of livestream viewers. We have realized that many of those viewers are families so multiple people are watching on one device. The data does not always convey what is actually happening. Our mission field is larger through the internet,” he says.

As it looks to the winter months Kilbourne Park Baptist intends to continue moving forward with phased ReGathering. Pastor Terry Smoak says if anyone in the gathered worship service were to test positive for the virus the church would suspend meeting together for a time. Kilbourne Park’s preschool also plans to be fully operational. In terms of congregational needs, Smoak says his members realize they are a part of a church body that needs one another.

“We are learning that God has hit reset for us to get closer to Him,” McCoy says of his congregation at St. Mark Baptist during this time. “We must continue to love one another and help each other. These are God’s commands for us. God’s people are being fed right now. In fact, they may be fed more now than when we were in the church.”