

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things were made through Him,
and without Him was not anything made that was made.
⁴In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.
⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." - John 1:1-5

This is a bittersweet report to write, as it is likely my last as a pastor in this presbytery (at least for now). I trust that by the time you are reading this report Susan, Amanda, Luke and I will finally have our visas from the Australian government and will be on our way. As you will remember, it was at this time last year (April) in Orlando, that I received the call to be the pastor of the Frankston congregation in Victoria, Australia. It has taken all this time to get the work permit and visas in place for us to go.

Reports that reflect at the end of a year are typically of one kind, but this one includes reflections of a more comprehensive nature as I consider the almost 16 years of ministry in Columbus. I can say with great thanks to God, that overall, my time here has been a time of "*joy and not of groaning*" (Heb. 13:17) and I certainly pray that it has been "*of advantage*" to them.

Having been in a congregation for this long allows for an observation of some natural cycles that take place in the life of a church. Some have shifted from youth to adulthood, others from early adulthood to middle-age, and still others from middle-age to their retirement years. These shifts each have their own challenges and of course the word of God addresses us each in their time and place.

When I arrived in 2004 the congregation had gone through a difficult time, with some interpersonal relationship troubles that had ended with some families leaving. Those early years were a time of recovery and healing and God blessed with a real time of peace. After about three or four years the congregation began to reach outside itself again and began to grow. The plethora of youth, this congregation had at my arrival (50+ under the age of 16!) have now grown up and many have gotten married and moved on. But thankfully, many have chosen to stay in the area and serve the Lord here. Their labors among us continue to infuse the body with energy and zeal.

The last portion of 2018 and the first portion of 2019 were again a time of struggle as interpersonal relationships were strained and around five families felt the need to depart. This was heart-breaking at many levels, but in God's providence was used as a time for reflection and learning. The congregation's recent study of the Peacemaker Ministries materials, both in Adult Sunday School and our annual Fall Retreat, was informative both in revealing mistakes we have made in the past and how to avoid those same relational pitfalls in the future. These times instruct us in how to love our neighbor as ourselves, to put the interests of others above our own, and to keep the awareness of the wonders of the Gospel ever before us as we as redeemed sinners deal with those different from ourselves in the church.

Because of our failures, early this year we suffered the loss of a number of dear families who had been an active part of the ministry for some time and we feel their absence, but the Lord has graciously allowed that healing to begin again, and in His kindness has added a number of new families to our body for which we are thankful. Looking at the cycles of church life, it is my anticipation that the Lord is readying this body for another time of active outreach and growth. We have begun to see that already.

One aspect of God's blessing among us is His allowing us as a congregation to be used of Him to see a new ministry center begin and develop in Louisville, KY. This is evidence of a healthy church. Like a typical family, we expect a congregation to multiply and grow, reproducing itself. Though the work is

still developing and “in the womb-stage” we might say, real ministry in real lives is already taking place. God has allowed this ministry, even in its embryonic stage, to bear the fruit of two conversions, as well as growth in discipleship for many. The Louisville ministry too, has been used of God as a training ground for two of our pastoral ministry students – Gary McNamee and Tre Cranford. Praise God with us that He has seen fit to allow us to plant the seed there and nurture it. As the Presbytery’s commission begins to take over the oversight of this ministry, it is essential that the whole presbytery give consideration to how it can be supported.

Our ministry to the broader Christian community in Southern Indiana through the Paideia Co-op, now in its 14th year continues to thrive. We’ve had to make some administrative and policy changes in order for the ministry to continue out of our congregation, but these have been made and the blessing to over 35 families continues. At a recent farewell party, a great many testimonies were written of how this ministry has enabled struggling families to be faithful to their calling to raise up their children with a Christ-centered education.

2019 marked a year of transition for the leadership of our youth group as Ethan Mathews has begun taking the reins with the help of Brenda Planalp. Both the youth group, and the College & Career ministries continue to flourish and be blessed of the Lord. There has been a rich fellowship developed with the youth of the Bible Baptist Church in North Vernon, and young people from both congregations make up the latter group. They are actively involved in Bible Study, fellowship times and service.

This year has also been a year in which the ministry at Greentree Retirement Community has blossomed. For several years we have conducted a worship service for the residents once a month. Mike Mellinger has been active in working to develop this ministry and now there is a midweek Bible Study co-led by Gary McNamee that is well attended.

Another great encouragement in the congregation was the attendance at recent Elder Training Classes offered by the Session. In light of the need for more active elders in our congregation, we are praying that from among those 14 who took the course, God Himself, would call and equip some to serve the kingdom in this capacity. In light of Andy’s departure, the uncertainty of God’s call on Gary McNamee and Ed Schisler’s nearing retirement, the need is pressing. Please pray.

Though statistically, our numbers were down somewhat, much of this is due to a stage of life issue, with students graduating, getting married and moving away, job changes and the like, the vast majority transferring to churches elsewhere. In all of this, we continue to see the Lord add communicant members to our church, both from our young children making professions of faith and from outside. Praise the Lord!

THE YEAR IN STATISTICS

Communicants added in 2019: Abby Planalp, Jaden Decker, Kara Schisler, Brad Bourdette, David & Sylvia Mills, Scott & Kelly Hoover

Communicants added already in 2020: Jason & Malisa Goodman, Summer Anthony, Katelyn Schisler

Transferred: David, Amanda, Sean and Fiona Ladwig, Michaela Fuller, Sarah Klein, Parker Hilliard, Nate Planalp, Louis & Melissa DiBiase

Removed from the roll: Kaylin Hogan, Leigh Dewar, Kurt & Lisa Klein, Lindsey Johnson
Ethan Fuller, Sherry Shoop, Patrick, Maddison & Danielle McDermott

Baptisms: None in 2019; Jason & Malisa Goodman & Penny Anthony (2020)

Weddings: Matt & Emily (Walker) Hoffman, Nate & Rebekah Planalp, Simon & Allison (Shoop) Harper, Eric & Anna Grace (McNamee) Brown, Josh & Lindsey (McCracken) Ng

You can see some of the cyclical nature of the ministry reflected in the chart to the right. Numbers, of course, do not tell the whole story, but they can cause us to inquire further, to pray and to labor more intentionally. Life cycles of the church do not turn favorable on their own. They turn when the church prays, seeks God's favor and submits to the King in obedience. The first month of 2020 has seen a positive increase in the average morning attendance to about 95.

I am thankful for the evidence of His work in an increase in those attending the Lord's Day evening studies together. These times are among the few we have in a work-week crammed with demands and expectations to come apart and rest, sharing our insights and applications of God's word together that we might sharpen each other as iron sharpens iron.

2020 will be a year of searching for a new pastor and electing new ruling elders. The available candidates are few, so pray for God's provision. And pray that God will help the congregation press on in faithful service. Pray too for the work in Louisville – for Tre Cranford in his exams, for Gary McNamee as he labors weekly there, and for the members of the fellowship that they be active in reaching others.

Closing Comments

As I close this report, let me say how much of a pleasure it has been to serve alongside you for 29 years. I will continue to labor with you, just not quite so close in proximity. I would request that your congregations regularly uphold the work in Australia in your prayers as their numbers are small and their resources limited. Ask our Mighty God for His powerful hand of blessing to expand the kingdom there. Thank you for your friendship. As the Lord gives you opportunity to travel, please come see us. Our home is always open to you.

Recommendations:

1. That Columbus' pulpit be declared vacant as of February 29 and the congregation be granted permission to call a pastor.
2. That Presbytery appoint Gary McNamee as moderator of the session pro tem.

- Andy McCracken

