

A Year with COVID, by Pastor Mike Wakefield, 2-27-2021

In just a couple of weeks, Covid will have been with us for a year. This is a report from Pastor Mike to North Laurel Baptist Church about the past year, with some observations about the present, and hopes for the future.

The Beginning

Last March is when it began for us at North Laurel. COVID-19, known in other parts of the world, became a threat to the United States and western North Carolina. To that point we were familiar with pandemics only from history. This one would visit us and present us with challenges we have never imagined.

In the beginning we were impacted with orders from the Governor about public meetings. This was accompanied with CDC guidelines warning the public of a virus which had for months proven itself deadly in other countries. At first the reports of COVID patients were few in number and located in other states. It would not remain that way.

The Facts

To date there have been: 2.6 million confirmed COVID cases in the U.S.

857,557 confirmed COVID cases in N.C.

9,191 confirmed COVID cases in Burke Co.

26 cases of COVID in our membership.

Some of our membership recovered fairly quickly, while others were hospitalized. For some the recovery is still ongoing. One of our members endured extended quarantine that to them seemed similar like prison. They are out now.

To date there have been: 513,517 COVID related deaths in the U.S.

11,186 COVID related deaths in N.C.

138 COVID related deaths in Burke Co.

One of our members would lose a husband.

One of our members would lose a father.

One of our members would lose a mother.

From these several of our members would lose grandparents.

Almost everyone knows someone who has succumbed to COVID.

I lost a long-time preacher friend, and one of my good friends lost his wife.

What We Did

From the beginning, our efforts would be criticized as either being too little or too much. During the past year some stopped coming and have yet to return, fearful for their health. The Deacons and I prayerfully considered what we believed to be God's will and acted accordingly. We make NO APOLOGIES for protecting the flock of God.

Our efforts to safeguard our congregation would change our worship schedule and meeting habits. For a few weeks we broadcast our services online using Facebook Live. That was followed by drive in services which were very well attended. From the parking lot, we transitioned to indoor worship with an altered schedule. Sunday School was postponed because of our small classroom sizes. Choir and congregation singing were curtailed. Meeting on Sunday for worship became a sole priority and Sunday night services were postponed. We scheduled two services to accommodate our "at risk" members and provide some separation for attendees at both services. Pews were marked off for use, and sanitation stations were placed strategically in the church. The voluntary use of masks was encouraged and those unwell were urged to stay at home until well. This has worked for our church and has allowed us to retain 70-80% of our attendees on most weeks. This is where we are at present and we are thankful to the Lord.

My Observations

I do believe this virus was politicized from the beginning and that we have had to endure much misinformation from the media. It has been used to muddle the integrity of an election, hurt a thriving economy, further divide our nation, and erode our freedoms. It has brought out the good and unfortunately the bad in people, both non-Christian and Christian alike.

As for the good, I have witnessed many acts of kindness, with people caring for each other, praying for, and sacrificing for one another. I witnessed the church remain the church under difficult circumstances. The brethren missed coming to church, and they missed each other. The love for God's things, funded through the giving of His people did not suffer, but flourished. We bought and improved the property next door. We took on seven new missionaries, and set aside special gifts for five more. Things long taken for granted: choir, music, Sunday school, fellowship meals, and others, have taken on new appreciation.

As for the bad, we didn't make it through April before dropping a missionary for bad conduct in his reaction to the COVID issue. For some who struggled with faithfulness, COVID offered yet another excuse to be unfaithful and go missing. Through the year, I witnessed believers, at times disregard basic attempts to safeguard the health of others. I hate masks as much as the next guy, but facts are facts. The virus is not transmitted from flying squirrels or leprechauns, but from person to person. If washing my hands, wearing a mask, and being careful will help other people to remain well, then why would I not do it?

I heard of Christians who were sick themselves, and with COVID in their family, refuse to be tested and continue to work. That is not loving your neighbor. Some have taken to social media, implying that Christians/Churches are cowardly, fearful, and backslidden because of precautions they have chosen to take. Such behavior is judgmental, hypocritical, and is displeasing to the Lord.

Going Forward.

We are now in our fifth week at church with no new COVID cases, and we are GRATEFUL TO GOD for his watch care and answers to prayer. The spread of sickness is waning, people are recovered, and vaccines are becoming more available for those who wish to take them.

We are preparing at North Laurel to gradually restore parts of our ministry that were sidelined for the last year. Congregation singing is going to resume, and the Choir will be practicing this Sunday evening at 5pm. Other announcements for the month of March will be forthcoming. We are planning a special service on Easter (April 4), from which we hope to springboard into a revived schedule that we hope will be a blessing and edify the church.

What to Expect.

Expect opposition from the devil. He would love to see the church limited to a COVID schedule. He would also love to sow discord in the church, and plant a critical spirit in Christian hearts. Don't be used by the devil.

Expect to see fewer masks at church as people begin to transition to pre-covid protocol. That doesn't imply you should stop wearing yours if you are at risk, and you may certainly step back from any situation that makes you uncomfortable. It is your choice. Please exercise mutual respect.

Expect some things to be different from before. You don't go through something like this without change. Don't expect things to return to normal overnight. Expect a few bumps in the road.

Expect to see new people, and expect to see people missing.

Expect that God is at work in your heart to change you, and be changed.

How To Prepare

Pray for your church. If Christians would pray as much as they surf, post, comment, and seek sympathy on Social Media, their lives, homes, churches, and country would change. We would be living in a different world this time next year.

Be faithful to the services and ministries of the church. Sentiment is no replacement for being there. If people only realized how important their presence is to what God is doing, they would reconsider missing.

Serve the Lord with gladness, (Ps.100:2) and worship Him in Spirit and truth (Jn 4:24). Living for God is not about checking boxes and jumping through hoops.

Prepare for a season of blessing from the Lord. Instead of seeking for things to be the way they were, press forward.

Philippians 3:13-14, Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

I know that you share my hope that 2021 will much different from last year, with more blessings and more strength from God.