**January 17, 2021 1 Corinthians 3:1-9**

 ***Annual Pastor’s Report***

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 3:1-9 NRSV

 *(1)And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. (2)I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, (3)for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? (4)For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human? (5)What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. (6)I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. (7)So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. (8)The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. (9)For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.*

**Notes:**

1. We have been ***working*** to the build God’s kingdom,
	1. Paul ***planted*** the seed of the Good News.
	2. ***Focus*** on the ministry of Jesus Christ.
2. We had to ***get*** ***out*** of the ***box*** and think on the move
	1. We saw increases to the number of people we were ***contacting***
	2. We may not have grown in traditional ways, but we ***impacted*** many more.
	3. We have given close to $9000.00 to the welfare of our community and those in ***need***
3. Keep looking for ways to ***improve*** and ***encourage*** growth
	1. Our greatest need is in that of ***workers***
	2. As a church we also need to ***encourage*** the members of the NYI and youth activities.
	3. Strive to improve our fellowship, discipleship and evangelistic efforts so the lost will see Jesus as their ***hope***.
4. Continue to accept the challenge to be a ***FED*** Church.
	1. The sowers job is to spread the seed in ***abundance***.
	2. We ***each*** have a job to do.
	3. Each of us must ***sow*** the seed,
	4. ***he*** brought ***you*** from sinfulness and washed the sins away.
	5. Turn your eyes upon ***Jesus***, listen to the voice of the ***Holy*** ***Spirit*** and do the work of our ***Father***.

**Script:**

What a year, 2020 was a year that will go down in the history books as the year everything seemed to fall face first into the mud. And while we have endured the year we must look backward to see where we have come from. We must look around us to see where we have gotten to; and then the most important part, is to look forward to see where we are headed from here. I have looked at our reports, and considered what the numbers are telling us; how are our finances, our giving and expenses; how was our attendance; where have we grown; and where do we need to make an effort to improve; and overall, how are we doing as a church. But as I have told you many times, the numbers we see in our reports are not able to truly gauge what we do here as the hands and feet of Jesus in this community.

How have we grown spiritually; from where we stood in relation with Christ at the beginning of the year, to where we stand today. How have you grown, how have I grown, and how have we assisted in the growth of others. My goal in our reports for this year is to give an accurate picture of how we have been working towards the building of God’s kingdom, and how we have grown along the way.

***Experiencing Growth***

Among the many things we have experienced this year; the first thing that comes to mind is the global pandemic; the Covid 19 virus, and the impact it has had on our world. If I was to report on the physical numbers of lives saved, baptisms conducted, or other physical numbers; what I have seen seems so small. We have not had any baptisms; I can think of one person who has given their life to Christ; but with the extenuating circumstances of this year, I must say that we do not see all that the Lord is doing within our communities and in the world.

We began the year as we normally do and everything seemed to be going as expected; and then, Covid 19 forced restrictions upon our country and communities. Under the direction of the General Board of Superintendents and the district leadership, we were urged to close down and follow the guidelines given by the state. I distinctively remember Dr. David Bowser saying something to the extent of “The church is not being closed; the buildings may be closed, but the church is alive and well. We are encouraged to rethink our mental models and minister to our people in creative and unique ways.” And with that we began a journey into the unknown.

For the first time since I began reporting to the district on behalf of the Ryot church, I was encouraged not to look at numbers so I would not be discouraged at what we see. I was encouraged to be creative and to minister to the people in different ways. So, I not only had to think outside the box, but I had to throw the box away and begin to stand in the unknown. How would we be able to minister to our people if we were asked to stay at home and not congregate in public. How would we fellowship, how would we be discipled, and how would we be able to evangelize our communities? And with that I thank the Lord for the Internet.

I have long desired to stream our services, and create a strong media presence on places like Facebook and YouTube. However, over the past few years I have had little opportunity and encouragement to do so. With the Covid restrictions in place, I had to resort to this media presence to continue meeting and ministering to our community at large. Our first online services consisted of a praise and worship time; broadcast live from my kitchen table followed by a message recorded earlier in the week; and it would be broadcast over Facebook. These services were a time of experimenting and learning as I discovered the ins and outs of Facebook Live and YouTube. Along the way formats would change, programs would update and create wrinkles in our stream; but overall I believe the people enjoyed this time and format.

After the restrictions eased up, we began to live stream our entire service from the sanctuary. However, this created new problems and the learning curve changed again. We were running into difficulties with our hardware used for streaming. And, we were having trouble with the streaming capabilities of our church’s internet. We had contracted with Comcast in November of 2019, but installation was to take place in April of 2020; which was delayed due to the Covid shutdown. Throughout this time, we were experimenting with different equipment and trying to find a method of streaming that was full proof. Our configurations were always coming up short. Our most consistent method of streaming was using my cell phone but the sound was not strong enough for the audience to hear. In the services to come, I am preparing to try use a different configuration and hopefully this will resolve the issues we have had. I would also like to thank Dale Sprigg for doing some research with some of his contacts to identify the hardware we have needed.

But let me tell you a little about our numbers during this time of learning to stream services. Beginning with our first live streamed services, we saw a significant increase in viewer attendance. And while we have little way of measuring how long each person watched each service, we do have a method of knowing how many people have accessed the services. Our first streamed service was on March 22, 2020 and we had 64 of our regular church attendance accessing the service. This is 10 to 15 persons more than our average in person attendance. Over the course of the summer and throughout the remainder of the year we seen a steady worship attendance, including online and in person viewership averaging 73 people each week and totaling 104 individuals who call this their church.

But on top of our regular congregation, we have also seen an addition of 31 visitors the first week we streamed, people who were not part of our regular congregation. Through word of mouth and members of our congregation sharing the messages through out the week, the following Sunday’s saw continued growth. We have been introduced to over 129 visitors to our services over the course of this year; averaging close to 73 visitors each week. Some of these visitors, are local people who are not able to come to our services when they are held but are able to view them in their leisure when they are able to focus on the word and the Spirit. Others of these person are from other places. Many are friends and relatives from around the country. But there are a few who I have not been able to find a connection to our church; people from Germany, India, and other places where the Word is not so easily broadcast or shared. All told, we have averaged an attendance of 123 persons participating in our services each week, including regular attenders and visitors. Of these we have had some sort of contact with close to 250 individuals; not bad for a church that averaged 50 to 60 people in attendance before the pandemic hit.

We may not have grown in ways we are used to growing, but numerically we have had an impact on our world in ways we may never really be able to know. But our reach has not stopped there either. What about those who do not have internet to access our services? I have worked diligently and faithfully over the past year to offer recorded DVD’s and CD copies of our services to those who do not have internet. With funds collected with the seed money supplied from the district, we have purchased discs and DVD players so, those who need, are able to get the word in this manner.

Some may ask how we know if these numbers are accurate. I would have to say these numbers are not accurate; in fact, I believe that these numbers are our minimums; we are reaching more than the numbers recorded on paper. Why? Because many people are sharing their views and not reporting that others are viewing the services with them. I believe there many others who are being impacted by our services being streamed that we are not able to count.

We have also reached out to those in our area who are in need in other ways. We have connected to over 340 people and at least 39 families. We have helped with heating oil, electricity bills, groceries, gasoline for vehicles; as well as, food donations to the food bank, and for some paying for them to be housed when they have no place to stay of their own. We have taken part in our kindness outreaches; reducing the price of gas for an hour on a Saturday, the Laundry Wash and Dry, the Annual Thanksgiving Dinner, and our Christmas Blessing. When all is said and done we have given close to $9000.00 to the welfare of those who are part of our community who are in need.

***Looking for Improvement***

These numbers are very encouraging. But we must not stop pushing forward. We must continue looking for ways that we can make improvements and encourage growth; not growth in the attendance numbers alone; but also growth in our finances, the growth of our facilities, and above all of these other things, spiritual growth. If I was asked what our greatest need was; I would have to respond that our greatest need is that of workers. I remember hearing the words of Jesus “*…But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting.” (John 4:35 NRSV)* There are so many opportunities to do the work of the Lord, to reap the crop of new believers who will come after us. Yet, we as a church have struggled to find enough people to complete the required background checks to staff the Nursery, our children’s Sunday School classes, Wednesday evening classes, and serve in other leadership capacities. We have several persons who are serving in multiple capacities because others drag their feet and resist following the Lord’s leading to step up and serve. We are currently searching for somebody to serve as the Children’s Ministries Director; somebody to oversea all of the activities of our children’s ministries.

As a church we also need to encourage the members of the NYI and youth activities. Ron and Penny have been working hard to build our youth ministries but they cannot do it alone. Others must step up to assist with these ministries encouraging our young people to attend the activities and encourage them to invite their friends to attend as well.

I think all of these things are connected; think of it in this way, if we do not have a strong children’s ministry, we will not be able to maintain a strong youth ministry. And without a strong youth ministry we will see a decline in the young adults in this church. Young adults eventually result in young families, and young families result in a growing church. I believe that if we build this congregation striving to share the love of Jesus to children, to teens, and young adults; we will see growth in many other ways. We cannot focus on one area and expect that to keep this church afloat; we must be striving to improve our fellowship by being engaged with the body of believers and engaging with the community at large. We must improve our discipleship so that we continue to grow spiritually; and we must improve our evangelistic efforts so that the lost will be able to see Jesus as their hope and be saved.

***Challenge***

In the year behind us we saw many obstacles and distractions to the ministries of the church. In the year to come we must continue to accept the challenge to be a FED Church. I was reminded this past week about a message I heard from Dr. Bowser in regards to the Parable of the Sower. Here is what Jesus tells us in scripture, *“Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!” (Matthew 13:3-9 NRSV)* Jesus tells us about the sower and then a little later tells us about the meaning of this parable. But if you look closely, we find something that is not stated but holds very true.

It was not the sowers intention to only sow seed on the good soil. It states very clearly that he sowed his seed on all types of soil, but I imagine he not only sowed the seed equally on each type of soil but he did it with enthusiasm and abundance. He did not sow sparingly on the rocky soil, or the path, or on the soil where the thorns were growing, and he did not sow more seed on the good and fertile soil. The sowers job is to spread the seed, and to do so in abundance. It is not our jobs to identify those who are prepared to commit their lives to Christ and only minister to them. Our jobs are to minister to all people; we must minister to the lost. However, many times the lost do not appeal to us because they are dirty, they are wicked, they are corrupt, they are everything we do not want to be or associate with; yet they are the ones who need it the most and the ones we are called to minister to.

Furthermore, I am reminded of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians where he talks about some quarrels that have arose. But what I hear is this, *“What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.” (1 Corinthians 3:5-9 NRSV)* We each have a job to do and if we are not about the Father’s business then we are slackers who think we have been called from our sinfulness just to sit back and wait for somebody else to do the Lord’s work.

My challenge for each of us, who consider ourselves to be a part of the church of Jesus Christ, is this; we must sow the seed, spread the word of the Lord to everybody, not just the good people, not just the people with foul language, not just to criminals; but to all people. Tell them who Jesus is in your life. Tell them how he brought you from your sinfulness and washed your sins away. Show them how to love the Lord, your God, with all of their heart, mind, body and soul. Show them how to love their neighbor as you love the Lord. None of us want to be considered a slacker; each of us wants to be able to hear the Lord say when we are called home to be with Him, *“Well done good and faithful servant”* but to hear these words we must be about the business of the Lord. Turn your eyes upon Jesus, listen to the still small voice of the Holy Spirit as He leads you, and do the work of our Father in Heaven.