

## **2020 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE ASSOCIATE PASTOR**

I sit here writing these words on the eve of Epiphany. Epiphany is the culmination of a season in the Church that begins in Advent, continues through the season of Christmas, and culminates with our celebration of the arrival of the magi. It is a season that begins with anticipation, preparation, and prayer, and takes us all the way through the story of the Nativity to its destination with the wise men following a star.

In many ways, 2020 has felt like a journey for all of us, too, and like the wise men we may be wondering where this journey might lead us or what the destination might be. Like the story of the Nativity itself, 2020 has been a year of disruptions. The COVID-19 pandemic radically (and unexpectedly) changed the ways that we do family and campus ministry, Christian Education, and campus ministry. Youth group, Sunday School, Food For Thought, and practically anything else.

In spite of all these challenges, the pandemic has also opened up opportunities for us to be creative, to think outside the box, and discover new possibilities for ministry. This year, two youth-led worship experiences (Youth Sunday and Celebration at the Manger) were conducted entirely virtually. While I lamented the loss of being able to worship in-person with our young people in-person this year, the virtual option also offered up new creative possibilities that would not have been possible in years past.

Youth from other churches (who might not otherwise worship at our church on Sunday morning) could suddenly participate and be included. Families who might not be able to participate (or in some cases, have even moved to other countries!) could now suddenly become worship leaders through the magic of digital wizardry. Through the medium of live streaming, friends, family, and loved ones who are not able to physically attend worship with us (even under ideal circumstances) could still connect with the gifts of our young people in new ways.

2020 also offered up new opportunities for our young people to connect with service. This summer, our youth connected intergenerationally with the larger congregation (via Zoom) for a 3-week book study on antiracism through the book, Stamped by Jason Reynolds and Ibram Kendi and a 21-Day Challenge curated by PC(USA) pastors and social justice advocates. Since gathering together in enclosed spaces was discouraged during the worst days of the pandemic, our young people took youth group outside with a Walk in the Woods with Dick Munson as part of a 3-week series on Faith and Science.

When the pandemic introduced new challenges for the Deacons' annual food drive, the youth group saw this as an opportunity for outside-the-box creativity for seeking to eradicate systemic poverty - organizing a "No-Contact" food drive (in partnership with our Deacons) that raised nearly half a ton(!) of donations to support TOPSS (Talawanda Oxford Pantry and Social Services).

In so many ways, 2020 has been a year of having to adapt. Having to use creativity and imagination to think outside the box in order to create solutions to unprecedented problems - and, in doing so, discover new opportunities along the way. As we look ahead to 2021, it is our hope and our prayer that (with God's help) we may begin to see some semblance of a return to normalcy.

Although I do hope that we, as a church, and as family and campus ministries hold onto some of this creativity as we look toward the future. As we remember this season of Epiphany, ancient literature tells us that the magi had the wisdom to follow a star to the destination of this child because they could see what the king could not. Magi possessed the imagination to notice the signs that others didn't and pay attention. Through their gifts of outside-the-box thinking, God was glorified.

Perhaps this past year, we have all gotten a little practice being "magi," and perhaps just like our Biblical predecessors, we've made some valuable discoveries along the way. As we look to 2021, I hope that we will see some of our beloved ministries that we lost this year come back to us. However, I also hope that we will always hold on to that creative spark as we imagine new possibilities for the future. Let us hold onto that little bit of "magi" in us so that (as Pastor Lawrence alluded to in his report), we may "serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love."