

2021 Pastor's Report

for the board, staff and congregation

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Your pastoral staff keeps a process of ongoing evaluation, which allows us to adjust and shift goals as new needs arise. Probably more than in years past will you notice that shift in this report. In more ways than one, “the ground is shifting underneath our feet,” which I hope you will read not as an apocalyptic earthquake but us settling into whatever God has in store for each and all of us in 2022.

Like any good journalism, this report exists for transparency and accountability. We are made stronger by this, and you become a more informed member by reading it. So, enjoy! Lengthwise, it's longer than one of those Facebook posts that overshare waaay too much, and shorter than one of those incredibly insightful-yet-dangerously intellectual profiles in *The Atlantic*. It's basically as long as it has to be to describe the past year of a church you love.

As always, your feedback and participation is welcome anytime.

2021 summary of church activities

Our first Sunday of the year (January 3rd) happened online, much in the same way we'd been worshipping since March 15th of the prior year. The hope and excitement of the New Year was buoyed also by a collective “understanding” that we would be “out of the woods with this whole Covid thing” before long. There were reasonable expectations that we'd be able to gather for Easter, finally develop some programs and resources that we've been dreaming about, and really get back about the business and pleasure of being community. This winter and spring brought different news, and we made the decision as a congregation to go about the business and pleasure of being community anyway – in consideration of Covid and in spite of it.

In February we restarted our adult education with a series called “God Talk” – simply allowing people to gather and raise questions about their faith, the bible, and the tradition...and then go looking for the answer! That continues to happen each Wednesday via Zoom and has produced some fascinating conversation and discoveries. Our Lenten theme - “In the Garden” – felt like a good opportunity to approach Lent in a different way, thinking about what abundance we do have and how we can nurture it in this season, instead of heading again into the wilderness (we've spent a good amount of time in the wilderness, haven't we?) Many commented that it was helpful to consider abundance lying within and around us as a counternarrative to the desolation that felt increasing with each passing week. And each of us even got to take a plant home!

The church building was open more in 2021 for outside organizations that wanted to make use of our space, and we were able to offer the ministry that our building provides to sororities, cooking classes, accountants, music lessons ++++ We want to continue to use our building to do

good ministry, and we hope to welcome more tenants in 2022 (you may even know someone looking for office space!)

This all happened while our Sanctuary team hosted *two* families this year on the third floor – one during the winter/spring, and one during the summer. Deep appreciation to our Sanctuary team and their leadership of that effort. Our church has gained a reputation as one of the congregations willing to host families in Chicago, and this is a huge ministry not only in Chicago but nationwide and globally. University Church is a force to be reckoned with when it comes to protecting and resourcing immigrant people.

If immigration is one of our major forms of ministry outside our walls, then there are three others – BLM, healthcare, and affordable housing – that made significant progress as well.

With regards to BLM, our committee has developed a deep and meaningful relationship with IL Youth Center, and I've been using my energy to point both UChicago and the Obama Foundation towards efforts with incarcerated youth.

As healthcare access is concerned, I remain the chair of the community advisory council for UChicago Medicine, and during the Obamas December trip to Chicago I was able to meet with them to discuss ongoing efforts being led by the community to curb violence and how they can plug in and not co-opt. Several of you probably heard my remarks as “the community spokesperson” at the inauguration of UChicago’s latest president, Paul Alivisatos, to this same effect. And our church goes about our work in the same way: we are partners *with*, willing to be *led by*. This collaborative ethos led the community advisory council to help design the (now fully funded!) Southside Healthy Communities model, which will begin rolling out next year, offering residents substantive changes to how healthcare is delivered (records consistent/accessible across hospital systems; community health workers; greater access in black/brown communities), and this work is tied directly to our church joining in 2015 the existing advocacy for a trauma center.

Our housing ministry, led by Vince Cole (staff), is talking with architects about potential new buildings for Woodlawn Development Associates – an entity we are essentially *stewards* of – and empowering residents in that building to lead the changes necessary and build a plan for a more stable operation.

That’s a lot of work, and because of a faithful few we’ve grown in relationship and reputation far beyond what seems reasonable for a church our size. (What’s reasonable anyway? We do *faithful!*)

Within our walls, the care team (how we will offer care beyond pastor) and discernment team (how we will help each other seek wisdom in critical moments) have people ready to go (you’re still ready, right?) and we should be set to begin in Q1 2022.

As pastor I've been quite frankly *reluctant* to push for these ministries to come into fruition in 2021. What I've noticed is that people are tired, and already feeling really stretched to make life work in their homes and at work/school, and instead of the usual "hey what's up?" calls and emails I'd make to keep our momentum, I felt compelled to simply check in and let people know they had a pastor and a church, and to call on both in and out of moments of crisis. It was hard to tune in virtually every week, especially for families, and this meant several of our goals as a staff had to shift.

My sermons this year were laced with themes of discernment and play/fun – the two things I heard you all hungry for the most this year. Covid scattered almost all of our attempts to gather together, and besides impacting our families and homes (some of us even had a bout, even after receiving the vaccine!), it also challenged how we think about work, how we want to spend this precious life, and what we want to do with the gifts we have. These are things I heard directly from you. Thus, discernment and *play*, because while Covid took away our ability to do a lot of the pleasure-giving activities of our life, it didn't take away the desire itself, and we've had to rethink how to faithfully tend to our desires while we discern where and how we want to be in this season of life.

What good discernment means is people are going to make decisions that usher them into deeper faithfulness. We want this! We want you to collude with God instead of collide, even if it means the kind of spirit listening that results in Ramona's departure as youth pastor ☹️ or Sergio's departure to NY ☹️ or Jean's planned retirement as church administrator in 2022 ☹️. What discernment has meant for all of us is that people who were once fully committed have needed to take time away, and people that have never volunteered have offered themselves in new ways. This is Discernment bearing fruit 😊

From June 1st to September 1st, I took my sabbatical. While the travel to Italy, Cuba, and Ghana that I hoped for were not possible, I was able to fully separate from this work and live in my body in new ways. I had a lot of fun. I slept a lot. And coming back, I spent basically the entire month of September talking about how this separation from work needs to be a weekly and even daily part of our lives. I give here deep appreciation to the Staff Relations committee for their care of me and the pastoral staff and for being so supportive of whatever our health requires. Also profound and deep appreciation for Valerie, Allen, and Denise, who led the worship and the fun during the summer.

After much discussion, prayer, and careful planning, we opened the sanctuary for in-person worship on September 26th, to go alongside our online service, which will remain...forever??? What we've realized is that we can do a dynamic worship service that still reaches folks at home and allows them to participate meaningfully, and we're striving to do that better each week. In October we hired Tiant to manage the digital elements of worship, and Kyle as our cameraman.

**You doin' okay? Almost done...breathe...*

I said in September we were in a “Genesis moment,” meaning this season we are in right now is the creation of the world. So much is moving. There’s a good amount of chaos and unknown. God is speaking. We’re still discerning. We’re still creating. Everything you read about above is open for you to dip your toe in and offer your gifts. New things are on the horizon. Things we haven’t imagined are going to happen this year. Ideas and urgings YOU have right now. We’ll get it done together, and with the help of God.

Attendance numbers:

(before 9/26)

Online: ~100 (~400 across the week)

(after 9/26)

Online: ~50 (~300 across the week)

In-person: ~60

New Members:

13 (hopefully to be introduced in January 2022)

Review of 2020 pastoral goals (set in last year’s annual report)

- **To learn and incorporate the practice of Discernment, for private and community practice.**

I won’t add much other than what you read above, with the note that we will be starting up our Discernment team in 2022 for sure (is anything for sure these days?) We’re talking about discerning the spirit of God a lot as a congregation and I’m hearing it in the membership, so it’s bearing fruit.

- **Establish care processes for entire congregation and teens.**

Again, we didn’t get to set this up, and our next youth pastor hire will need to focus on these care processes as part of Christian formation. It will be a priority of your pastor in 2022.

- **Use worship to ritualize more of our church’s values.**

This is a strange goal, but what it basically means is we want to make sure our work inside and out of the church is ritualized. Meaning when people leave, or enter new phases in life, they share that with their church and we pray for them. You saw that happen more this year. How can we ritualize work in affordable housing or BLM? Think on these things.

- **Use pastoral sabbatical time to reimagine/implement new church commitments.**

Folks offered themselves in new and different ways while I was gone, and that was powerful to learn about in returning. Let’s keep it going! What if, instead of simply thinking about committee “chairs” and a dozen or so important leaders, every church member...every...church...member...found a way to plug into the life of the church, as the sign of our faithful commitment to live in community?

- **Learn from and expand digital experience of church life.**

We are growing in this every single week. Remember that time we did a passing of the peace where one person was online explaining and someone was in the sanctuary acting it out? This is only the beginning. I'm excited about the unknown ground we will break in terms of hybrid worship life.

2022 Goals (based on 2021 goals + new insights)

- There are a lot of people that have gifts, and have no interest in joining a committee. (If I wasn't pastor, I'd be one of them for sure). This year, I want us to figure out how to incorporate you into our leadership and faithful action.
- Discernment and Care team activated.
- Youth pastor hired, Youth ministry activated.
- Greater support of local artists.
- Get more visitors inside the church. There's too much awesome to keep that light hidden.

On a personal note...

I love administrative work (reports like these? Yay!), but Covid really reminded me of how much I need the creative space to truly thrive in the healthiest version of myself. Planning and producing worship each week was (mostly) fun, but by the time June came around I needed that sabbatical. Not because I was tired of you, but because the work without kind of recording and performing that I need in *J.Kwest* simply wasn't there (and still isn't!) So I've had to manage my workweek to make a little more room for that – all of which began after my sabbatical, and without anyone noticing really – and I've been much healthier and feel like I'm inhabiting a more faithful version of myself. After 11 years together, your pastor and your church look good together still, and I'm especially grateful knowing that so many of my peers are burning out by either getting no help in doing the work, doing way more than they/we are trained for, or being in congregations where they can't express their full self. I don't have those problems (well, not *all* of them anyway), and I thank God for that reality.

The staff here could use more help – in everything from designing ministries we need to offering care to members to coming during the week to change the sign to coming a bit early on Sunday to help us set up – and an incredibly capable staff must go alongside a curious and active congregation. I know: you're tired. You're doing your best. At least you're keeping up with your pledge. AMEN to all that. I'm not berating you. You know me! That's why I'm saying in 2022 let's figure out what it means for us to all be faithful parts of this congregation. Let's take nothing for granted. Let's figure it out, and not be afraid to recast everything in creating this iteration of University Church.

Finally, and this is the closest I'll get to berating: I think you should tell more people about your church. I bet you know 5 people that would absolutely LOVE this church, and in 2022 you need to share it with them. Be "evangelical" in the truest sense: this place is GOOD NEWS! We are absolutely primed to welcome in new people, and sometimes it is only our hesitancy keeping us from going exactly where God needs us to be in this coming year.

Let's move from hesitancy to courage in following where the Spirit leads. In all things.

I'm going to keep showing up with my best, and I'm glad our hands are on the plow together. Please ask. Please be curious. Please stay faithful. Much Love.

*Prepared by: Rev. Julian DeShazier, Senior Pastor
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