

FIRST *words*

TO REACH PEOPLE FOR JESUS CHRIST & TOGETHER BECOME MORE LIKE HIM



DEALING WITH COVID-19: A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

By Tiffany Hammer

Teaching is my calling, and truly what I love to do. March of last year brought everything to a grinding halt, with so much uncertainty. I was heartbroken and exhausted with how we had to end the school year. As we began getting emails and texts about the new school year, so many emotions stirred. Will it be safe? What will it look like in a new school? How will I get my students to wear their mask? Can I help my students deal with the trauma they have seen and heard so much about? Can I keep my own family safe from this horrible virus? So many questions filled me with a lot of stress and anxiety. I began praying for the students and the families who would walk through my door. I prayed over the new school year so full of unknowns. I knew my new group of second graders would come with questions, possible delays in their learning, and a nervousness of the new school year. I wish I could tell you all my stress and anxiety went away. In the beginning, there were lots of tears and many days of doubting my calling. Each day I planned and prepared for my new second graders I found myself so thankful I was able to teach kids. Kids can be so much more resilient and flexible than adults. My students began teaching me how to be hopeful, and persevere even under the hardest circumstances. I found myself observing these amazing humans and came to understand a few things. Kids adapt far better to change than adults. Kids can wear a mask and not be bothered, they suddenly become superheroes. A kid's love of learning can't be taken away by COVID-19. The smile or laugh of a kid can help with anxiety and stress. Through their smiles, even under their mask, they helped me feel more grounded and see the importance of my calling. This year has been crazy, but so many great things are happening in our schools. We are making connections with kids and helping them see we are all in this together. We can do hard things and come out even stronger. I found comfort in routines and found myself thrilled to be back doing what I love so much. For eight hours, I forget what is going on outside of the walls of school. My focus is on the kids. I am part of an amazing school family with the most amazing support. We take care of each other. This year has taught me so many things. Change happens whether you want it or not. Finding at least one thing to be thankful for helps your focus, and prayer does move mountains. Yes, it has been difficult at times and so uncertain, but the seven to eight hours I spend with my students are times I am certain being in the classroom has been a time I will remember and cherish. I am so blessed to get to call myself a teacher.



words

FOR THE JOURNEY

Dr. Phil Christopher
Senior Pastor

March 15 will mark an anniversary, and I'm not talking about my twenty-sixth anniversary as Senior Pastor. March 15 will mark the one-year anniversary of the first time we suspended in-person worship and Sunday school due to the COVID-19 crisis. A leadership group from the church, which included health professionals, met in the Conference Room at 5:00 p.m. on Friday, March 13 to discuss the health threat. In this emergency session, we decided to suspend all in-person gatherings for two weeks to help flatten the curve in Abilene as a sign of community support and safety. In some ways that day seems like years ago.

Two-weeks became three months, including Easter. Then we had the relaunching in June and the stops as numbers climbed. It was painful to see our beautifully decorated sanctuary empty during Advent. This was a journey we could have never imagined last March. I know for all of us, this has been a hard year. In my 45 years of ministry and challenges our church has faced over the last two decades, this has been the most challenging year of my ministry.

Many of us are fragile after this last year with COVID-19, controversies of all kinds, the inevitable difficulties of life and what is called "Zoom fatigue." We have been isolated from each other. We are vulnerable in the ways we respond or react.... I identify with my pastor friend of First Baptist, Richmond Virginia, Jim Somerville. He said, "It's a hard time to be a pastor. My concern is for my congregation in this divisive season. I can't write or speak a word that isn't misunderstood."

Yet, I want to focus on the positive. As we approach this COVID-19 anniversary, we are still here as the Church of

Jesus Christ. In God's grace, we have survived. In fact, we have thrived. We are still ministering, perhaps in greater ways than we ever have. We might not be coming to church, but we have been being the church.

We have discovered innovative ways to worship, reach out, and use social media. In ways, we are reaching even more people with the Good News of Jesus. One example in my area is Wednesday Prayer Time. We might not be meeting at the church, yet each week we offer Evening Vespers that reaches hundreds of people with comfort and hope way beyond our church dining room.

As we approach this "anniversary," my message is one of hope. Research says the most important trait a church needs, especially in these difficult times, is hope. The congregations who will not only survive, but thrive, are the ones with the hope they

are making a difference in the lives of people and the world - and we are.

The other trait that will enable churches to survive is that they have a clear sense of missional identity. And we do. Through our "Faces and Places" mission campaign we have created a world-wide missional network. Your mission work has reached out not only through your giving, but in our personal involvement in South Africa, Spain, Cambodia, Thailand, Rwanda, New York, Los Angeles, and McAllen. We are blessed that our own members, Jeff and Alicia Lee, serve as CBF missionaries in Macedonia and we are able to support them. Our children certainly know them. They raised money to buy a cow the Lee's use in their ministry with the poor. They are the faces of missions we know, making a difference in tough places that have little witness of Christ.



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Continued from page 2.

Let me encourage you to live in hope about the future. Hopefully, this Easter we will worship together in the sanctuary – can you imagine.... We have possibly six people who will be baptized on that joyous Sunday. On March 6, we will celebrate our first Family Dedication since September because of COVID-19. Yet, more are on the way since we had thirteen babies born in the last year. In worship, from baptisms to dedications, we will see the signs of new life and hope which are dawning and calling us into a promising future.

As we walk through these weeks of Lent toward Easter, let me offer you a practice which can change our lives. It is the discerning process by St. Ignatius called “Holy Indifference....” What? In this spiritual practice, we say, “I am indifferent to anything but the will of God.” We pray the prayer of Mary “Let it be to me Lord, according to Your Word....” and the prayer of Jesus: “Not my will, but Your will be done.

We pray these two things:

1. Set aside anything you need to set aside so you can be completely open to what God wants.
2. What needs to die in me in order for God’s will to come forth in my life?

I pray this practice and journey will help us find hope and God’s will in a deeper way.

Hopefully,
Phil

Hello everyone!

Another month has gone by. It is no joke we have all had to show some sort of perseverance to keep going through this period of COVID-19. Truly, I hope your families are doing well. You are all in my prayers!

Here is a short youth ministry update. In-person Wednesday Bible Study has been going strong for 6 weeks now (I think that’s right, it’s hard to remember how time even works anymore). We have been studying the Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus teaches His disciples that following God is more than just following a list of rules. To follow God well, our hearts need to be changed! Thankfully, Jesus wants to change our hearts. No longer do we think selfishly about life, but instead we are called to live our lives with the Kingdom of God in mind. He even gives us the opportunity to live out the change in our lives. This has been a great study and we aren’t done yet!

I’m constantly reminded how our students live out their lives with joy. Through tough and strange times, students find joy in the little things. They love others well and seek God’s way in their lives. Let’s get in line with the students of this church and follow Jesus with joy.



“When joy is a habit, love is a reflex.”
- Bob Goff

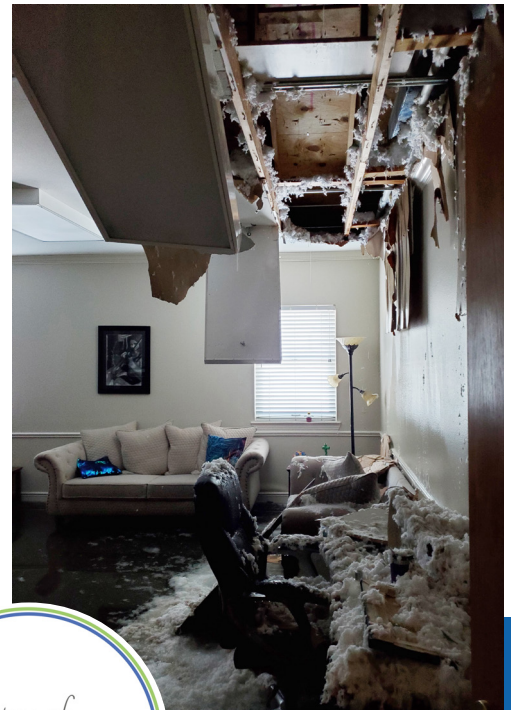
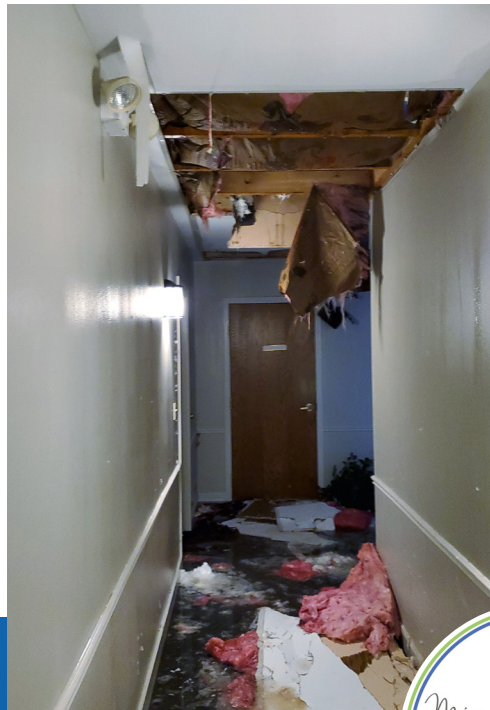
Grace and Peace,
Austen

EFFECTS OF THE STORM ON THE CHURCH

Many of our members have asked if the church received any damages due to the snow storm which we all experienced a couple of weeks ago. The answer is both good and bad! Good news, most of the buildings at the church did not see much damage. However, the bad news, the Ministry of Counseling and Enrichment was hit pretty hard. We had numerous pipes break in numerous places, all of which were professionally insulated and then running through attic insulation. The building had been checked everyday while downtown was without power for four days straight. But, on Friday morning February 19, we discovered a huge mess. Basically, the entire building had 3 inches of water inside and all of the offices on the north side of the building had the ceilings drop down into the room. Needless to say, it was a mess and much of the furnishings and electronics were destroyed along with all of the flooring and walls up to 24 inches.

We were fortunate to have Briercroft Fire & Water Restoration on site just after lunch Friday and they are in the final stages of getting everything dried out and cleaned up. We have the Crowe Group lined up to help get the building repaired and back in operation. Meanwhile, on Monday, February 22, we relocated the Counseling offices to the University Place building and had them up and running, ready to see clients the next day. So, in spite of the damages, the ministry goes on!

There were a few other issues as a result of the storm. The Family Life Center and City Light both lost their boilers, but repairs are already scheduled. There was a small issue at the Hope Center, but no damage to report. So, all in all, it was not terrible and we are thankful and blessed to have insurance coverage and local companies to help us get things back in shape.

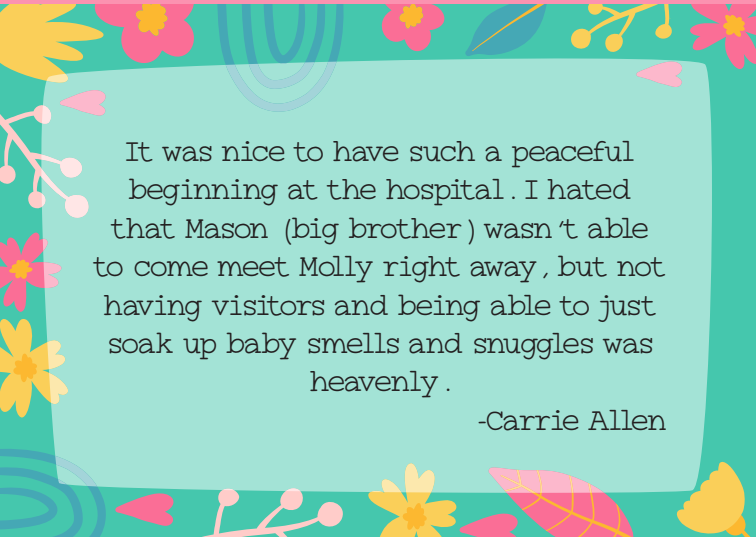


PRESCHOOL MINISTRY

It's hard to believe March is already here and we are getting ready to spring forward in time. I know this time last year we were all wishing we could "spring forward" through the pandemic nightmare and it's hard to believe a year has gone by. It's so easy to reflect back and think of all the negative things which happened...that's our human nature. But, I encourage you to reflect back and think of all the good which came from this past year. Within our church, we had 7 babies born in March alone! Crazy! I have watched these families persevere in the midst of the unknown and they have done so gracefully. Many of these families never thought they wouldn't be able to have a "normal" 1st birthday party, but they are making the best of their circumstances and doing the best they can.

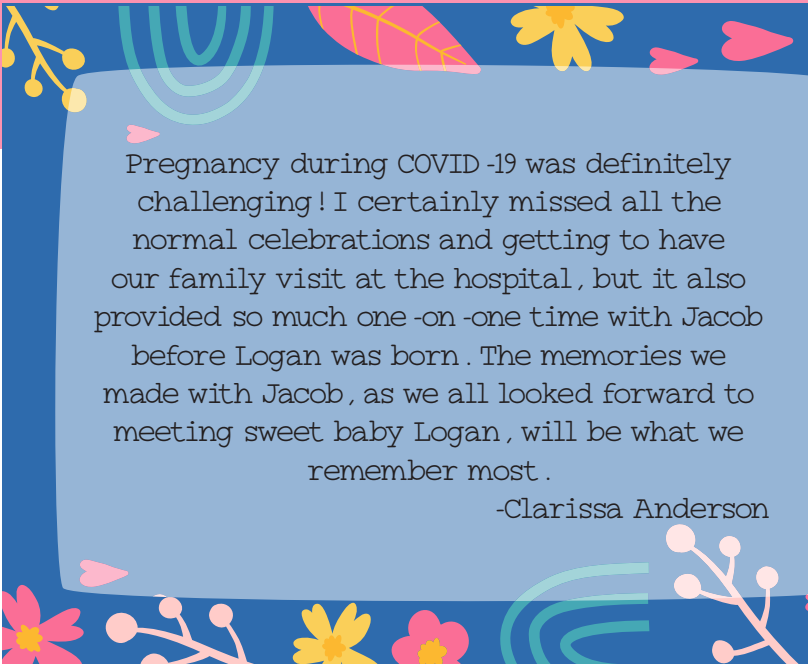
Some of our moms shared their reflections over the past year and the blessings they encountered. Enjoy as you read these sweet stories and I hope you can reflect back and see God's grace over your life the past 12 months. Also, I encourage you to spring forward with God and all He has planned for you...take the time to notice the trees blooming, smell the roses, and just enjoy the sunshine!

Candy



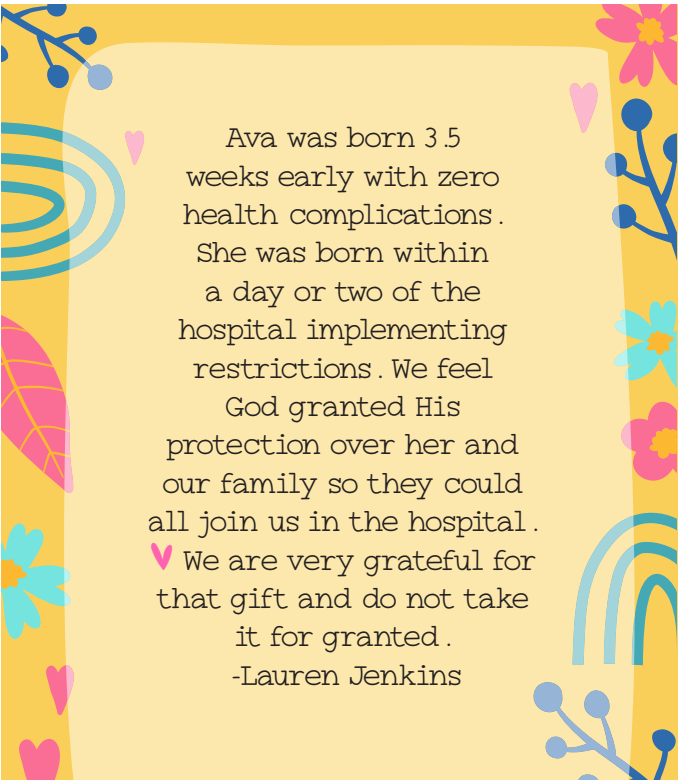
It was nice to have such a peaceful beginning at the hospital. I hated that Mason (big brother) wasn't able to come meet Molly right away, but not having visitors and being able to just soak up baby smells and snuggles was heavenly.

-Carrie Allen




Pregnancy during COVID-19 was definitely challenging! I certainly missed all the normal celebrations and getting to have our family visit at the hospital, but it also provided so much one-on-one time with Jacob before Logan was born. The memories we made with Jacob, as we all looked forward to meeting sweet baby Logan, will be what we remember most.

-Clarissa Anderson



Ava was born 3.5 weeks early with zero health complications. She was born within a day or two of the hospital implementing restrictions. We feel God granted His protection over her and our family so they could all join us in the hospital. ♡ We are very grateful for that gift and do not take it for granted.

-Lauren Jenkins



Beginning our parenthood journey during a pandemic was a blessing I would've never expected. It allowed for us to let go of the busyness, obligations, and expectations to purely focus on this new little life we had been given!

-Kristian Spencer

FBC MISSIONS: **ACTING IN** *love*



Will you join us in praying for our missionaries? We would like to highlight a few of those we support in this month's edition of First Words.

Jeff Lee is a CBF Field Personnel/Missionary who FBC supports through your giving. You may or may not know FBC bought a cow or two! You can follow Jeff on Facebook to get updates on the cows and other programs he is involved in Macedonia, from building greenhouses to providing healthy foods and vegetables to those in need.



In 2017, we started a "Cow Bank" program to loan livestock to local farmers. The program focuses on helping local farmers grow their production. Agricultural development is essential to achieve sustainability. One of the first farmers in the program was Daniel.

In the fall of 2017, we gave Daniel four young calves. Daniel takes care of the cows, using the milk to meet the needs of the people in his community. Our relationship with Daniel has grown over the past three years.

The program states that recipients of the calves will repay the loan with the first offspring of the original animals. This August, we received four young calves from Daniel to repay the loan. These calves will stay at our farm until another farmer is chosen for the program, which currently has 16 participating farmers. The program impacts farmers in several communities across the country as they participate in cooperation with each other. Ekrim, another farmer in the program, lives close to our farm and helps us with the corn silage for our cows.

We are building beloved community with our neighbors as the relationships we build are based on mutual support with members of the community. Lupcho, another farmer in the program, began to work at our farm last year. This past month, his wife needed surgery and others in the program came together to raise the money needed to pay for the surgery.



Building relationships is essential for the work of the Cow Bank. We are hoping to increase the program to engage with more farmers throughout the year.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted many lives in Macedonia with many people in desperate need. The Food Bank of Macedonia has increased its operations over the past six months and has distributed over 20 tons of food this year. We anticipate the need will continue to grow. An eight-year partnership between the Food Bank and CBF allows us to meet the needs of thousands of families across the country.

At the end of September, we began a project to package food boxes for over 1,600 families in every municipality across Macedonia. The boxes contain enough food to feed a family of four for a week and will include masks and hand sanitizer. We have engaged RETO, a local rehab ministry, to help with the delivery of the food across the country.

Together with Metro Baptist Church, CBF field personnel Lesley-Ann Hix Tommey and Kathleen (a 2020 Student.Go summer intern) designed a virtual Urban Immersion curriculum for small groups to engage.

In a typical year, Metro hosts about 8 Urban Immersion teams to work alongside their ministries and learn from urban practitioners. We have missed having groups in our space.

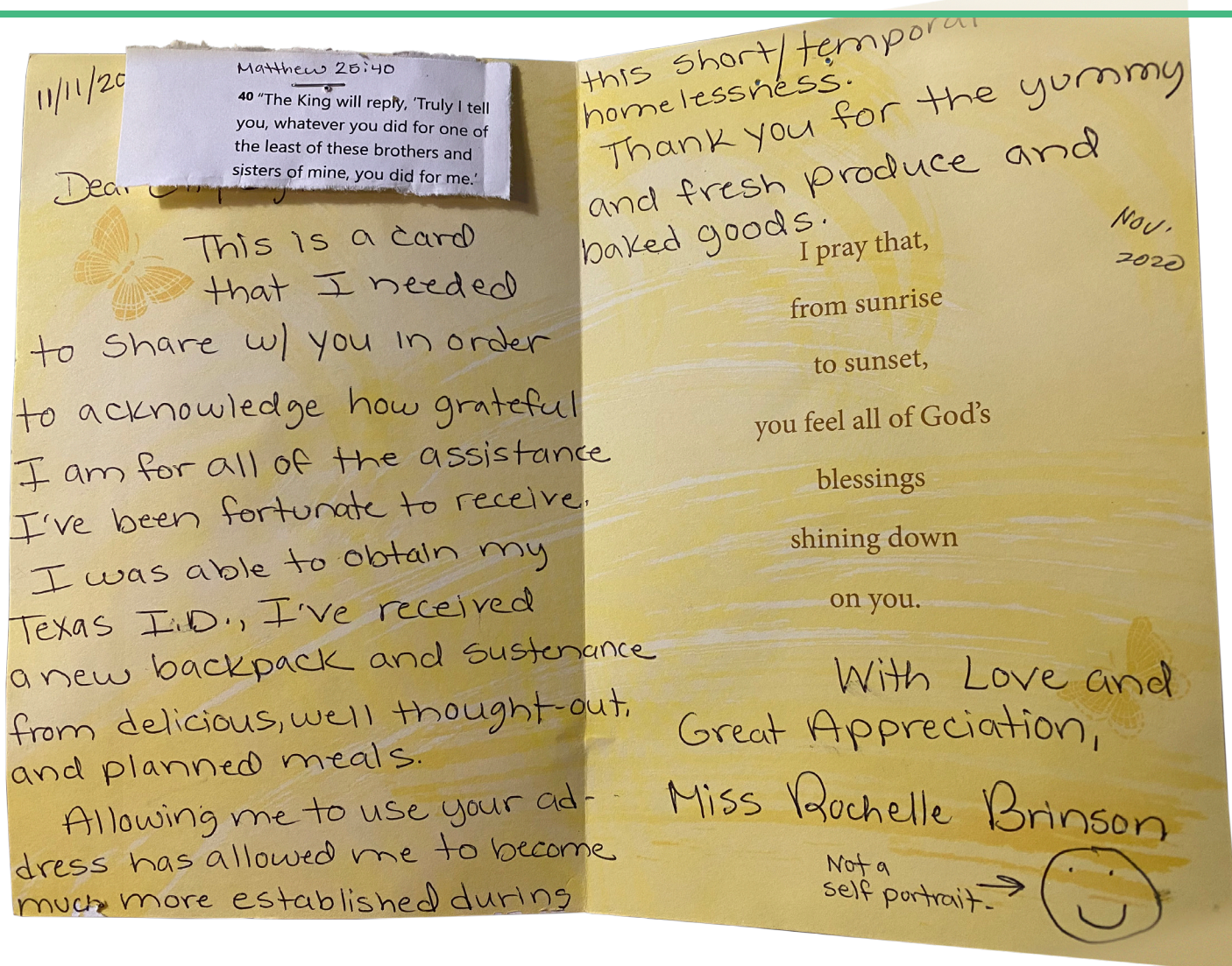
And because travel is still unsafe, we dreamed up an option which brings the learning and service to our partners' hometowns. Metro's virtual Urban Immersion curriculum takes a look into six aspects of our ministry in New York City: Homelessness, Food Justice, Youth & Education, Gentrification, Interfaith Work, and Arts & Theater.

Each of the six sessions includes a video introduction by one of our local ministers and practitioners, group activities, a community connection, Bible study, questions for reflection and conversation, and a final challenge for engaging this work at home.

For more information, visit rmmnyc.org/programs/urban-immersion. We hope to see you up here in NYC again soon!



- Lesley-Ann Hix Tommey, field personnel serving in New York City



CHILDREN'S MINISTRY

"Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal..."

I know I may be taking this passage we find in Philippians 3 a little out of its context, but there is a lot about the past year I truly would like to forget and just get on with things.

I think as a church we have done our best to press on towards the goal Christ has called us, but our pressing on has just taken on a much different look. Thank goodness we have the capability of continuing almost all of our programs virtually and have therefore kept most of our programs going.

As we are now well into 2021 and had the craziness of a snow storm along with loss of power and water, I hope and pray we will continue to press on towards the goal for which God has called us. We are doing our best in the children's area to help the children learn and grow in their love of Christ and will continue doing this whether it is virtual, by mail, or in-person.

I am looking forward to the day when I can see all your faces, when I can hug you, or shake your hand.

Blessings to all,
Becky Tucker

STAFF ANNIVERSARIES

March 15, 26 years
Phil Christopher
Senior Pastor

March 19, 3 years
Matthew Broyles
Pastor for Young Adults



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STEWARDSHIP UPDATE

February 2021

Budget	February	Year-to-Date
Required	\$ 202,060	\$ 560,620
Given	\$ 156,883	\$ 502,759

God continues to bless our faithfulness through the tithes and offerings given to His Kingdom work.



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