Wow, what a difference one year can make! Covid19 hit, shut us down, kept us from worshipping together, messed up our observances of Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, and even kept us from reaching out with love, mercy, justice, and the Good News of life in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Or did it? As I look out across the Central Bay District, I see worship has not ceased. Celebrations have taken place. Ministries to the communities have continued and even increased. The Gospel has been shared in word, deed, and spirit. While Covid19 may have been a ploy of the evil one to shut the church down, the church chose to rise up.

Now, as vaccines are being administered and it appears that this pandemic may well come to an end in the not-too-distant future, the church that chose to rise up needs to make more decisions. Will it resort back to the way it was? Will it be content to continue to function in its now normal? Will it keep on rising up to the new thing that God is doing?

I believe, what as God told Israel through the prophet Isaiah, God would tell us today and keep on telling us. It is good to reflect on the past and celebrate what God has done, and God has done some awesome things. But we cannot and should not stay there because, “it is nothing compared to what I am going to do.”

Of the major changes forced on us by Covid19, perhaps the biggest and most drastic was the need to rethink worship. I agree that there is nothing quite like being in the presence God with the family of God. I, too, long for the day when there will be no restrictions on in-person worship. However, being forced to find new ways to worship has also reminded us that there are those who cannot worship with us for health and physical ability limitations but want to, there are those who may have had a bad experience with a church but want to worship God, and there are those who are curious about God and the church. Because of the various digital means necessary to connect with local church attendees, others have been blessed.

For this reason, we need to start thinking of ourselves as a digital church with a physical presence instead of a physical church with a digital presence. If we are serious about reaching people who don’t go to church, then we must take digital ministry more seriously. After all, most of the people we want to reach are already online. In fact, it would be wise to consider those who are not already of our church but are viewing us online as another campus.

I have recently been reading many articles that espouse taking an even better look and use of virtual reality not only in churches but other organizations as well. For our use, there are 5 quick things we need to do to take advantage of that have the potential to make a long-term difference.
1. Focus on Engagement, not just Views. While views matter because people matter, views are less valuable than engagement. To do this, use the comments to have people check in, identify themselves, and share what they are hoping to experience. Ask questions during the service, inviting viewers to respond. Have someone engage the commenters. Invite people to leave questions about the message or service in the comments. Viewers may watch, but engagers are far more likely to return.

2. Have a clear Next Step. It’s important to have a clear next step for physical attenders and even more so for virtual attenders. It can be as simple as “Be sure to attend next week for …” but something more substantial is better. Offer an orientation to “new-comers” via Zoom or Facebook groups. Figure out a way to follow-up with virtual attenders and then do it.

3. Assume Intelligence, not Background. The reality is you will likely have more unchurched people than ever before. That’s how the internet works. Many of your new attenders will be open spiritually and have a belief system. And they’re thoughtful people. Just don’t assume they know the scriptures. So when you go to a Biblical story or idea, give a 30-second introduction to orient everyone watching to the passage. There may be many regular church attenders who will be grateful you brought them up to speed too.

4. Think Monday, not just Sunday. Think about how many opportunities online presents Monday-Saturday. And trust me, the people you reach on Sunday will be online again Monday looking for hope, insight, guidance and meaning. So, think through your social media channels and how you can come alongside people during the week with encouragement, questions, reminders, and maybe even an online gathering or two to follow up.

5. Give people more Access to the Real You. One of the chief challenges unchurched people (and churched people) have is they don’t think pastors are real. I know that sounds weird to put that in writing but just probe a little deeper with people and you’ll discover they have a hard time relating to pastors personally. Deeply personal beats highly produced. This Covid19 thing has further revealed that we live in an age where everything is uncertain, people are looking for authentic. So, think about how you could do something real and personal to connect with people in real life. Your real life. Their real life.

Want to dig deeper into making our new virtual be reality? To truly develop this new campus? Nona Jones has written an excellent book that will guide you through the process. It’s entitled: From Social Media to Social Ministry: A Guide to Digital Discipleship. I highly recommend you and your leadership, and especially your virtual campus team, review this book.

_I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it?_

With you on the Journey,

DS John.