

Word Tabernacle Church  
821 Word Plaza, Rocky Mount, NC 27804  
Office of the Senior Pastor  
James D. Gailliard  
State of the Church Report  
February 27, 2021

Dear Word-ites,

Grace and peace be multiplied to you and to your families. I miss you. I miss the energy we collectively bring to a room. I miss the expressions on your faces. I miss the warmth of your hugs and the firmness of your handshakes. I miss hearing the sounds of worship - *"preach pastor"*; *"I know that's right"* and all of the uniquely Word Tabernacle sounds, expressions and emotions.

Before I get too far into my report I want to say, *"Thank You."* Our staff has worked so hard this past year. This has been difficult ministry for all of us. Pretty much overnight we were expected to become experts in multi disciplines while also ensuring we ourselves remained healthy to continue to do the work. Additionally, you the membership supported the work which resulted in a solid year both in terms of membership growth and financial growth. Again, thank you!

But, we are all still dealing with a lot. Many of us are feeling anxious, stressed, disconnected, fearful and depleted. We are still navigating uncharted territory and negotiating unfamiliar waters with no previous paradigms, pastoral prototypes, ministry models, or Biblical blueprints to follow.

As of today, we have been out of in person worship for 50 weeks. When we started 2020 none of us could have known what the year would bring. As your pastor I am beyond proud of how we as a church family have maintained our spiritual, emotional and relational health during this pandemic. We are all in unnavigated waters. I have never pastored in a pandemic and you have never been a member in a pandemic - until now. With a year of experience on our collective church member resumes we have

learned a lot and what we have learned will position us well until we are able to return to in person worship.

I recognize that our economy, schools and businesses are slowly returning. The natural question is "*When will WTC return?*" I hope by now we are all clear that this in no way is a matter of operating in fear. We have not and will not make any decisions in fear. Whenever we do it is counted to us as sin. We are making biblically sound, spirit led faith decisions.

Science leaves no doubt that attending a religious service - even with protective measures in place - is inherently risky during this pandemic that's being driven by an airborne virus. According to the American Medical Association there are five risk factors that determine whether an activity is one where an infectious person is more or less likely to spread COVID-19 and church services have all of them. They are:

- Enclosed spaces
- Large groups
- Close proximity to others
- Long duration of exposure and staying in one place
- Loud talking and singing

Many of you may have seen my recent social media post where I attempted to share a simple calculation with others to best understand what we are dealing with. In a normal worship setting the building code requires only 4.5 sq.ft. per person in an assembly. Currently physical distancing requires 144 sq. ft. per person. Even if we were already moved into our new worship center we could only worship about 200 members. In our current sanctuary that number is reduced to about 50 members.

The answer to when we return to in person is less about a date and more about conditions. Those conditions include:

- The lifting of physical distancing requirements
- All five tiers of the population receiving the vaccine.  
Currently we are on Tier 3. The Tiers are:
  - Healthcare Workers, Long Term care staff and residents

- o Adults 65+
- o Frontline Essential Workers
- o Adults at high risk for exposure
- o Everyone - It should be noted the highest percent of our members are in this category
- A vaccine allocation that significantly closes the current supply demand gap

In short, we will return to in person worship when it is safe for all of our members to return. We are a family and we are not leaving anyone behind or out. We leave the wilderness when everyone can enter the promise land. Since I know everyone is anxious for a date, I am projecting those conditions will be met by the end of the summer. At this point my projection is we will likely return around Sunday, September 12, 2021.

Many of you probably have both family members and friends who have already returned to in person worship. We see many examples of churches in every county we have members who have also returned. Many of these churches are basing the decision to return to in person worship as a 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment issue. As you know the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment protects our freedom to peacefully practice the religion we choose. Several months back I published an Op-Ed on this very subject. Here is a portion of what I wrote:

*Over 500 years ago, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenburg igniting what we know as the Protestant Reformation. Two thousand years ago an innocent man was crucified outside the city on a hill called Golgotha paving the way for all of mankind to be saved. The two most significant acts of the Christian church both occurred outside the church building. Not to mention, the Apostle Paul spent most of his ministry physically distanced from those he repeatedly expressed he longed to see. Yet, somehow, churches were planted and the New Testament was written. Buildings are important, but they are not to be worshipped. The notion that Christians cannot worship without assembling together in a building is flawed both scripturally and historically.*

*Churches should have stricter re-opening guidelines than restaurants or hair salons for the simple fact that we gather*

*far more people in close contact for longer periods of time. Reduced to the lowest common denominator, the church gathers people. We refer to our memberships as "congregations", "fellowships", "assemblies". The typical church gathers 10-100 times the people of any other community-based business and North Carolina has more churches than any other state in America except Texas and Florida.*

*More importantly, churches are the only community-based business with the mission to love our neighbors. One infected person in a gathering of even 100 people puts at risk an entire community. This is not loving. It is especially not loving to African Americans who are disproportionately impacted by this disease. Churches continue to worship and develop disciples - virtually. In many situations churches are growing. Our first amendment rights have not been violated.*

*So, while God has allowed for this season of evangelism, racial reconciliation and innovation, the response has become- "let's sue."*

*Churches that open too quickly are treading on dangerous ground. Each congregation should assess within their local church context, "what is our real motivation for opening now?" If it's because of money, then I would remind you of Jesus' words in Matthew 6:24 - "No one can serve two masters..." If it's because of loyalty to conservative ideology, political party or race, then consider Colossians 3:3 "...your life is now hidden with Christ."*

*These are hard times for us all and we need the church more now than ever. I too am eager to hug our members again; I just want to have as many of them alive as possible to hug.*

*I think we would all agree that we are still worshipping, and we have consistently shown that everything that was essential pre-COVID-19 continues to be essential. In short, we are figuring it out.*

*There is an irony here. The irony is that as COVID-19 has forced us to limit our public involvements it has also created its own*

public exhibition. COVID-19 has exposed every possible structural inequity in our society. It should not be lost on us that there is *"nothing new under the sun"* (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Historian David Kennedy in his book, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War* wrote, *"The Depression was not just a passing crisis but an episode that revealed deeply rooted structural inequalities in American society."* Today, COVID-19 is doing the same. Time nor space allows me to fully expand this thought, but COVID-19 does not affect everyone equally. In many communities people don't have the opportunity to physically distance at home or work and many people do not have the option of working from home. Not to mention that minority populations in the US disproportionately make up essential workers. Here in North Carolina the recently released Revenue Consensus Forecast highlights how the cost of the pandemic is being borne disproportionately by poorer segments of society. Low-income populations are more exposed to the health risks and more likely to experience job losses and declines in well-being. These effects are even more concentrated in economically disadvantaged minorities. The pandemic is not only exacerbated by the deprivations and vulnerabilities of those left behind by rising inequality, but its fallout is pushing inequality higher. I could go on and on in every segment of society - education, housing, economy, etc.

But, here is the point for us. None of this should alarm but instead it should further motivate us. After all, the church is not only A mediating structure but THE mediating structure in our communities. Unlike government, the health care industry, and traditional social service agencies, we don't categorize people by their "needs" and treat them as "clients." Rather, we view people holistically (i.e., mind, body and spirit) and welcome them as brothers and sisters who can both give and receive in the context of an extended church family. God uses the church as a tool for righting wrongs. I believe this is our season to show our region how great God is and how deeply committed God's people are.

As we prepare to enter into a post-pandemic world, we must understand that it is likely not going to be a light switch that we hit and suddenly we are back. Instead, this year will lead us

into a gradual emergence into a new normal. Organizations including churches who function like COVID-19 never happened will prove to be making a mistake. In the same way 911 forever changed American society COVID-19 will do the same. So, what are some ways church may be different?

- **We must learn to effectively minister to people both in the room and online.** As best I can tell people are not dropping out they are leaning in. We are preparing for BOTH in person and on-line engagement.
- **We must foster connections.** Our members can't just be connected to the church (either online or in person) we also must connect every member with another member and with a community.
- **A fresh look at our vision and mission.** Vision never changes for an organization, but it does at some point need to be communicated in a different way. Mission changes based upon where the organization is on the journey. Our vision and mission must be restated to speak to the next 15 years of the ministry. A full room is not as important as a fulfilled mission.
- **The building is still important but will be used differently.** The Impact Center must be used to equip people. Every room of our building will be employed as "mini training center" where content is being delivered to people both in the building and online in every possible area of human development. If we are known as the agency that is teaching what can't be received elsewhere it further secures our significance in the community.
- **Content, Community, and Connections.** We must deliver revelatory, relevant, and raw content from every Center and we must make that content applicable in a local and global context. The goal of our content can't be consumption it must be to establish community and connections around it. It has been said, "*nobody should be able to out-local or out-community the local church.*"
- **We are still a five-generation church.** We must ensure a standard of care for every member of our WTC family. This requires intimacy with attitudes, culture, language and felt needs of each generation. This will mean taking what

is core to our faith and theology and contextualizing it five different ways so that everyone gets to eat and grow.

- **Politics aren't going anywhere.** We have seen how extreme politics have perhaps irreversibly damaged the evangelical church. This will never happen to us because we have allowed our political positions to be based upon scripture. We have pledged allegiance to the Bible and not to the constitution and our identity is in Christ and not a political party or an ideological framework of either conservative or progressive thought. Our ability to properly address political issues is a WTC strength.
- **Spiritual Entrepreneurship is a thing.** As a church we must see opportunities and not obstacles. We have been gifted with creativity, innovation, imagination and fierceness. While others are looking at problems, we must see solutions. This is the space where our mission intersects with the marketplace. Let us not forget that just a little over five years ago every bank in Rocky Mount declined to finance the radical idea of a church buying a Home Depot building. Opportunities for housing, business creation, expansion, and contract services are all around us.

In closing, I want to inspire us to recognize how strong we are together. Sometimes that strength and that unity will be harnessed in one room and sometimes in thousands of different rooms. Either way, we are still strong when we stay together. We can be in ten different counties and a dozen states and still be strong or we can worship side by side in a single sanctuary and be strong.

Maybe if I dream out loud my dream will become our dream. It is my dream that when we do return, we return into our Center for Performing Arts & Worship (CPA&W). The CPA&W will seat 2,000 people, be furnished with an audio, video and lighting package to rival some of the finest public venues in our nation. The lobby will greet you with a uniquely designed water feature. This will be a space you will not want to leave. Most importantly we would have given our community the gift of an anchor asset that would provide a place to hold trade shows, concerts, health fairs, talent shows, civic events, community fund raisers, political debates, job fairs, and so much more. At

our current rate of giving, it would take us three years to occupy. If every family would make a monthly pledge to Project Thrive (above their normal tithes and offerings) and commit to that pledge for the remainder of this year we could actually be worshipping together in our final sanctuary when we all return. Would you take a moment and prayerfully consider participating? This is going to take all of us and it's going to take our partners here in Rocky Mount and around the country to help. So, would you invite a family member to join with you? We are going to post a graphic on our website to share with everyone our progress. We are also going to post two digital giving walls on our website - one with the names of all who give tithes and offerings and one for those who give to Project Thrive. Hopefully this will motivate and inspire all of us.

Our Project Thrive goal is \$2.75mm. WE CAN DO THIS....TOGETHER.

Thank you for all you do. I love you. I miss you. It is my honor to be your Pastor.

Still Thriving,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "James D. Hutton". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the typed name "James D. Hutton".