

State of the Church Address

September 26, 2021

Keith Johnson

I always look forward to sharing this report with you. It's a time for all of us as a church to be updated as to what is happening in a more detailed way than we can in a weekend service or in the bulletin. So thanks for being here, either in person or online. Thanks for your interest in some more details about where we are today as a church. I really appreciate that!

This has been a year of challenge, transition and strength together as a congregation. As I talk about this year, I'll be referring to a year that started in October last year. We had resumed services with some people joining us in person, but many of us were still watching from home. We were navigating youth groups and Awana, small groups and large group settings very carefully. We've had to be creative and flexible. We've had to make hard decisions.

There have been some recurring themes in the past year. I've asked us to be gracious and understanding to people leading our city, our schools, our state, to the medical people in our community and to our own leaders and staff.

I also asked us to pray diligently for our leaders in this time of uncertainty. I asked you to lighten their load with our prayers.

I asked you to remember who we are and what we are to be about in a time of fear. I asked, What will be said about us, the followers of Jesus in the midst of our current situation? And I reminded us that we don't have to be fearful. Psalm 46 says, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble." 1 Peter 5 reminds us, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."

And I've invited you to be faithful, bold, courageous, caring, gentle, humble, kind, empathetic, hopeful followers of Jesus in the midst of all that is going on around us.

I asked you to remember the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. I asked us to make sure that what we say, what we write, what we post is filled with those qualities.

And as a congregation you stepped up to the plate. Thank you for stepping up to the plate. We've disagreed at times about what is the next step forward but thank you for valuing our unity, for valuing our peace within the body of Christ. Thank you.

I want to begin by thanking people for their partnership in our ministry here. I know I will leave people out and frankly, everyone who serves here deserves and needs our thanks.

First, thanks to my wife, Nina, who because of her hard work allows me to do what I do.

I want to thank our staff. First to a couple who aren't here. Two people left our ministry staff this year—Jolanda Songer who served part-time with our Middle School young people. Jolanda left us in February.

And Matt Swider, who led our worship and our Voltage youth program, left us in March to take a position in Michigan. He did great ministry with our youth and worship teams and was with us for twelve years.

I want to say thanks to members of our staff. Let's start with the people who make this place look great and help us out with setting up every day around here. Thanks to Rob Lucht and Christian Carlson who have done a great job. Christian recently left to go to college. When you show up at a meeting or small group and the room is all ready to go, it's those guys who have done that quietly behind the scenes. They've done a great job.



Rob



Christian

Thank you also to some people who keep this place running smoothly.

Thank you to Diane Kristenson who handles our money and pays bills around here. Thank you to Callie Batson, who used to be our administrative person, but who came back to work here in the area of accounting at the church.

And then thank you to Lynnette Sena who works with all the staff and greets all of you in the office with a smile, keeps calendars, does bulletins, newsletters, and schedules rooms.



Diane



Callie



Lynnette

And then thanks to those of us who work with various groups of people. First, those who continued on staff this year. Thank you to Deanna Carlson our Director of Children’s Ministries, to Neil Botts, our Pastor of Discipleship and Administration, and thank you to our pre-school teacher Doris Sparks.

And this year we did a bit of reorganizing and Sam Bodnar joined our staff working with Enfuego and Voltage, our middle school and high school programs. He’s a great addition to the staff.

Also just very recently Kate Plummer joined our staff as well working with worship teams to bring meaningful worship each weekend. Let’s thank all of these who seek to help this congregation live intentionally for eternity.



Neil



Deanna



Doris



Kate



Sam

Let me clarify what our constitution says about how leadership works at Life Covenant.

The Leadership Team is selected by the congregation and we’ll be doing that a little later in our meeting tonight. They serve three year terms and can serve up to three terms. The Leadership Team is charged with the responsibility of overseeing the day to day operations, programs and finances of the church.

Elders are selected by a unanimous decision of the Leadership Team and serve as long as they would like to serve. They are charged with helping the staff with the spiritual care, teaching, and ministry to the people of this congregation.

This year, Linda May, Linda Hull, Bev Guffy Tom Guffy, Mary Ann Bishop, and Dale Bishop have served as Elders of this church. We meet most weeks to reflect on being Shepherds or elders and to pray for this congregation. We want to thank them for their dedicated commitment to serving Life Covenant Church.



Maryanne Bev Linda Linda



Dale Tom Keith

Then thank you to the Leadership Team as well. They have served with generosity with their time and great compassion, mercy and wisdom in a very challenging time. The buck stops with them, and they have met the challenge.

Here are the members of the Leadership Team: Beverly Schneider, Jessica Cook, Angela Haddick, Theresa Stahly, Julie Lamb-Heller, Mike Hatten, Marvin Williams, Tom Rispens, Kacey Askin. This is a great group of leaders who are tasked with directing this church.



Beverly Julie Angela Theresa Jessica



Marvin Mike Kacey Tom Keith

Thank you also to a variety of people who do a variety of things. Thank you to our Kids' Church leaders, Small Group leaders, Stephen leaders and ministers, Awana leaders, nursery workers, EnFuego leaders, Voltage leaders, ushers. I could go on and on. Thank you. This is a team effort.

So let's try to get an understanding of how we are doing as a congregation. It's always very difficult to quantify exactly. Even more so in the last 18 months. Is a congregation healthy and doing well because their numbers grow or their giving grows? And how do you measure spiritual growth?

In terms of numbers of people, in the last eighteen months we don't know exactly where we stand when people have been watching from home. We know how many devices are watching but not how many people.

One day I received, on the very same day, two cards in the mail. One was from a couple whom I have known, he was a legislator, and the other couple I didn't know. They thanked me for our live streaming services and our online ministry, and even included a contribution to our church.

We just don't have a great handle on who is watching every weekend, but it's a new aspect of what we do around here.

But there are some indicators of health even today.

We continue to have very good participation in small groups of various kinds, even if it is by Zoom. And again thank you to everyone who is leading a group— especially right now during our Community Bible Experience.

We've had good participation in our Voltage activities, graduating one of our largest classes ever. And for many months our adult leaders in Voltage, and in Enfuego did that on their own. They truly did a great job.

In past years, I'd tell you about numbers but frankly, we really don't know how this has gone. In person attendance on average is way down, like just about every church, but many continue to access our online services, some who have never attended our church in person.

Let's talk about giving.

Is a congregation healthy and doing well because their giving goes up or doing poorly if their giving goes down? My answer would be that depends, because of factors like the economy, what kinds of people come to your church, that someone in a church has a windfall, or a big donor moves away. All of those things can contribute to a church's financial status. But people giving faithfully does reflect that people believe in what a congregation is doing.

In this very unusual year, our income has been very good. I have to admit, this has been uncharted territory—will people give at the same levels if they don't even physically come to the church building? This had never happened before in my 42 years of ministry.

But here's what has happened. This fiscal year runs from October of last year to September 30 coming up in a few days. This fiscal year giving to our budget will be the highest in five years. And I said the exact same thing last year. Your support of this ministry and the ministries in this community and of our missionaries has been amazing.

A lot of our giving has been online, which is a new trend and many people are mailing their gifts in. This congregation has maintained their giving in new ways.

Building for Life III payments continue and last year at this time our balance stood at about \$173,000. Today our balance is at about \$96,000. I hope we can pay that mortgage off this year completely.

So let's compare last year and this year.

Last year, for 2019-2020, we had a budget of \$724,275 compared to \$736,508 this year.

And our budget giving last year was \$706,894. This year's budget giving as of today is \$740,287.

So our giving was significantly higher, but also for the first time in many years, we actually met our budget and even with a few more days to go.

This year, our Building for Life giving was \$75,193. Last year that figure was slightly higher at \$77,463.

If we add our general fund and Building for Life giving, the total is \$815,480. A little over \$30,000 more than last year.

Now, this doesn't include all our giving. In addition, people give for such things as memorial gifts, special missionary offerings to International Evangelism Outreach and Bishop Eluidi Issangya, Florence Crittenton, Family Promise, our Make a Joyful Noise appeal to upgrade our audio system here in the sanctuary and benevolence. If all that was tallied as well, another \$42,432 more would be added in this fiscal year.

Put it all together and we're at \$857,912 that was given this year to Life Covenant for its various ministries. That's about \$12,000 more than last year and just \$4,000 short of the most money ever received in one year at Life Covenant in 2019.

Let's move away from the budget to the question, so what's the bottom line? How much did we take in and how much did we spend?

The bottom line is that this week when we finalize the year, we'll have about a 8-9% surplus for the year, which will be used for expenses this coming year and which will restore reserves, which are important as well.

Remember the challenges we had a little over a year ago with sewer lines and at last year's meeting I said, "We now have some of the finest sewer lines in the city?" Well, reserves allowed us to do that without panic, that's what reserves are for.

Our current financial situation will allow us to move boldly ahead in ministry. The Leadership Team has led well, making decisions about money this year.

Also, people ask about our solar panels, even people who drive by or walk by. Well, they have been on our roof now for three years and in those years, they have saved the church over \$5,500. Those were all paid for with a generous donation.

Let me make two observations. My first observation would be that we believe in what we are doing here and we invest our money in Life Covenant Church, and that is great! This year, many churches struggled financially. It hampered them. It slowed them down. It moves me to see this today. It's not money for money's sake, it's money for ministry's sake.

Second, I want to remind you that how this church operates is that most of our giving is to a general fund. That General fund pays for missions, all of our youth and children's ministries, all our staff, snow removal, grass mowing, and all of the building needs. We call all that the general fund, but that is the heart of what we do around here.

All of this is to say that we are a healthy church financially at this meeting.

Let's talk about our denomination for a few minutes. That's our denominational logo up there next to our logo.

- We have about 875 churches in the U.S. and Canada.
- On any given Sunday approximately 300,000 people worship in Covenant Churches.
- 33% of those congregations are Ethnic and multi-ethnic, making the Covenant one of the most diverse denominations.
- Offices of the ECC are located in Chicago and are being decentralized.
- Our regional offices (the Pacific Northwest Conference) are located in Seattle.
- Two churches in Helena—Ours and Headwaters

Please check out our denomination's website at covchurch.org sometime and find out more about the great things that are a part of our denomination. In a day when many denominations are experiencing downturns, it's exciting to be a part of a church continuing to move ahead.

Now, even with all those numbers, as I have said in the past, this is not about numbers, or money, or even how many small groups we have. It's about people. People coming to faith, people growing in their faith. It's about people reaching out to others.

What will the next year look like? I don't know. None of us predicted well what would happen this past year.

But there are thousands of people in Helena who are not connected in any way to a community of people who believe that Jesus is the Savior of the world. There is no shortage of people who need Jesus and we want to continue to be faithful and fruitful for the Kingdom of God at this location. And all of us are in that process of becoming more like Christ, that process of discipleship. And we want our times of worship to become even more precious to us. And we desire that our times of fellowship and ministry remain sweet.

We have had to get very creative in the last 18 months to carry on our ministries. I anticipate that that may be the case in the year ahead as well, but we'll do that. Our mission will remain the same. Let's continue with our vision for the future to make fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ, and live intentionally for eternity.

Thank you.

Other business at the Annual Meeting

At our meeting, we passed a new budget of about \$744,000. The overall change in this annual budget reflects an increase of about 1% over the 2020-2021 budget.

We thanked Marvin Williams who has completed nine years on the Leadership Team and is termed out. We also thanked Jessica Cook who has resigned her position for personal reasons after serving two years.



Marvin

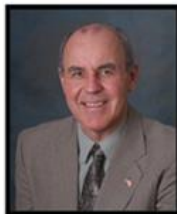


Jessica

We also elected Jennifer James to her first three-year term, Bill Woon to his first one-year term, Julie Lamb-Heller to her second three-year term and Mike Hatten to his third and final three-year term.



Jennifer



Bill



Julie



Mike