

**20/20 Vision Beyond the Year 2020**

The American Academy of Ophthalmology defines “20/20 vision” as having normal visual acuity, or the clarity or sharpness of vision, measured at a distance of 20 feet away. The year 2020 has brought some unforeseen events yet, with just under half the year left to go, there is still time for progress and adjusting the lens for clarity. As CMBA member congregations look forward into the new church calendar year, what is the vision they expect to “see” and experience in the year 2021? Is it even possible to think about 2021 with any certainty?

Pastor Ryan Perz says Three Rivers Baptist in Irmo, like other churches, is learning to operate day-by-day and admits the difficulty in planning too far in the future. Continued virtual prayer meetings have been a source of strength and connectivity for the church even as a portion of its membership has resumed in person worship services. Despite the obstacles COVID-19 has created, Three Rivers is moving forward.

“Our mission is to glorify disciples locally and globally. This just creates new challenges to that. A friend prayed that the testimony of many would be that they found Jesus during this pandemic. I believe this is happening and there’s encouragement in that,” Perz says.

Looking ahead, Three Rivers is focusing on Bible studies about unity and Perz is encouraged to see members serving in new ways during the pandemic. Some of the youth have begun helping with technical needs and behind-the-scenes servant leaders formed a cleaning team, while other members have worked together to organize preregistration and seat assignments for the worship services. Perz likes seeing the generous spirit of his congregation.

“I’m seeing the Body of Christ serve one another and the love for our neighbor really coming out. When I came to Three Rivers two years ago there were a lot of great things going on here, but I never expected this to happen. We can see things half-empty or half-full. I can celebrate the good things, it just doesn’t help to highlight the negative,” Perz says of the current situation churches are faced with.

A church requires data to plan and operate. Balancing budgets, hiring staff and lining up the appropriate number of volunteers to serve each Sunday all involve numbers and a knowledge of available resources. Evaluating 2020 data has presented new challenges like how to accurately count online worshippers or, in some cases, hard decisions when financial giving has decreased or stopped all-together. Some CMBA churches report permanently cancelling ministries like Wednesday night meals or suspending ministries like weekday preschools as a direct result of changes caused by COVID-19.

Since NorthStar Christian Center in Columbia will continue to meet virtually for the immediate future, Pastor Brian Thomas says there are no concrete plans for what onsite ministries happening next year might look like. One ministry NorthStar has continued is its full day child development center, which cares for the children of first responders. The congregation has held a few events in the parking lot and small group leaders are staying in regular contact with members, interim plans that Thomas says have been a good fit for his church. Thomas says church leaders are bracing for challenges they can’t know about ahead of time, while continuing to expect God to do big things.

“We are reaching more people virtually than we’ve ever reached in our church. I sense an excitement in the body of Christ that the Word of God is going forth and producing what it will. It’s an exciting time in the Kingdom,” Thomas says.

According to reports from Pew Research Center, of those Americans that indicated in a 2019 survey that they attended religious services at least one to two times a month, 59% now say they attend services in person less often and 57% say they watched services online or on television instead of in person because of the coronavirus. While somewhat expected, this data gives way to a key issue for churches to consider about pre-COVID marginal members and attenders – how can this segment of the population be engaged in a new era of widespread online worship? The concern is that occasional worshippers might choose a sporadic online worship option, or nothing at all, instead of returning to become fully engaged with their church family. Has your church missed these worshippers? How can your church reach them again?

Church services and religious programming have been available through radio and television for decades, but livestreamed services provide relational and interactive elements that are unique and can continue to make an eternal impact moving forward. Online giving options are another lifeline for churches as well as members and virtual worship attenders who want to continue to tithe when not attending live services. As highlighted in a previous CMBA [article](https://www.columbiametro.org/online-campuses/), some churches may also be positioned to launch an online church campus in the coming years.

As churches check their “20/20 vision” for the year 2021, some may wonder what it will look like for church to be fully reopened and before a vaccine is made widely available? One CMBA congregation is exploring this, after recently resuming almost all activities and with plans to be fully reopened by the end of September. Pastor Erik Estep says Village Church in Blythewood has had to cancel some annual events because of the coronavirus, but it is no longer allowing it to dictate plans moving forward.

“I think the thing that’s interested us is that the gathering places and stores are ok to be open…but somehow we’ve made it tough for the Church. When we all closed down at once, it gave the message that church is ‘not a place you need to be.’ We want to write a different narrative,” Erik explains.

Like other CMBA churches, Village Church went to livestream-only worship in March. Then four drive-in services were held at a local farm venue before the first live service in June, with all regular safety precautions in place. This summer, Village Church decided to hold children’s and youth camps and a three-day Vacation Bible School. Estep says there were salvations at each camp and the church saw worship attendance rise by about 75-100 people when these ministries resumed.

“I’m grateful we did it. Our attendance numbers are slowly moving up, driven by the fact that we’ve had camps and people are getting used to the idea that church is open. We have thought out steps to make people feel comfortable,” he says.

Estep recognizes other local churches are operating at differing comfort levels, but maintains many Village Church members are expressing their readiness to reconnect in person and through small groups. Moving forward the church plans to continue service-oriented community events and expand existing school ministries to meet the new needs of students and working parents. Village Church is also ready to engage folks who are emerging from quarantine with bigger questions about their own future.

“This experience has made people face their own mortality, and we’re seeing people questioning if they’re right with the Lord. People are responding differently, and churches are responding differently,” Estep says.