

THE *Traveling* CHURCH OF THE PANDEMIC



In March 2020, **CommUNITY Church of Salem** began displaying a banner on the columns of its now silent worship center reading, “The Church is not closed, it’s deployed.” We rejoice to report that this has not merely been a slogan but an apt description of the creative outreach of the church and its pastor, Tom McCracken, during the COVID-19 pandemic. They have mobilized for numerous creative ministry efforts in the spring and summer of 2020 — but this has been the mark of the church through the years.

Aiding the Community

The church began immediately ministering to the needs of the medical community and first responders locally. The SBC of Virginia was able to provide masks for distribution at several locations around the state, and CommUNITY Church became a distribution center. These face masks were given to hundreds who needed them in the area. The church even began delivering masks to additional areas of need.

Aiding the Public School System

When it was announced that the local public school system was planning a hybrid schedule (which meant children would be home some days each week doing online schooling), Pastor McCracken jumped to the aid of the school board. Having formerly served as an elected member of that school board, he knew the challenges of this plan for parents. McCracken volunteered his church to help and eventually was appointed as co-chairman of the Roanoke County Public Schools Community Day



“The Church is not closed, it’s deployed.”

Care Task Force. This task force, in conjunction with the SBCV and other non-profits, secured numerous local churches to serve as host locations for day programs, including daycare, tutoring, and weekday activities to help local families.

Creative Roof-Top Worship

When churches began outdoor drive-in services, CommUNITY tried a creative approach: roof-top worship. The physical layout of its property allowed the church to put a team of musicians and a preacher on the roof while the parking lot filled with people in cars hearing the Gospel being proclaimed. Families who lived nearby could also hear and, “each Sunday,” said Pastor McCracken, “several of the church neighbors would sit out on their porch, Bible in hand, and listen in. One of those neighbors told me that her stepdad began listening on the porch despite the fact that she had ‘tried for years’ to tell him about the Gospel.”

Restaurant Revivals

When the pastor heard that local restaurants were struggling, he decided this could be a Gospel opportunity. CommUNITY began a series of “Restaurant Revivals,” where they would go to a local restaurant, provide outside worship (with music and preaching), and order meals delivered to everyone’s cars. The group would even take up an offering, which was presented as a gift to the restaurant workers.

For testimonies of their outreach creativity, look no further than the front page of the *Roanoke Times*. In April, Dan Casey wrote about “The Traveling Church of the Pandemic” (Dan Casey, April 29, 2020): “Tuesday I attended the most peculiar religious service I’ve ever observed. It was outdoors, in the heart of downtown Salem. Congregants listened to the sermon over their car radios, like patrons at a drive-in movie. Meanwhile, gloved-and-masked restaurant workers scurried car to car

across a parking lot, taking orders and rushing take-out lunches to the faithful and hungry. A trio sang praise songs and each time they wrapped one up a chorus of honking horns burst into the air. Near its conclusion, a deacon in a polka-dotted face mask accepted donations from drivers, who deposited them into an overturned cowboy hat. All the proceeds of the collection—nearly \$1,000—went to workers at the Mac and Bob’s Restaurant. Welcome to the Traveling Church of the Pandemic.”

“One of the purposes,” said Pastor McCracken, “[was] to inject some sort of financial resources into these struggling restaurants. We can do a lot more than sit at home and lament that we’re hurting.” CommUNITY ended up doing six such Restaurant Revivals and has been a continual blessing in the area.

Perhaps a better name for the church would be “The Mobilized Church of the Pandemic.” To God be the glory! ■