



Dear Church Family,

I've always loved birds. My kids tease me mercilessly about my dorky delight. Since moving here to be your pastor, I've tried to spend at least one morning enjoying the bird-beauty of the RGV, one of the best places in the US for bird-watching. Saturday mornings often find me, Kevin, Asher and some Shipley's donuts out walking around and taking in the beauty of God's creation.



The last week in December, though, that beautiful creation got *really* crowded. “What the heck?” Kevin asked as we pulled up to Quinta Mazatlan. It was 8:30am on a Saturday and the parking lot was packed. It was birders. Birders from all over the US, on vacation. Dozens and dozens and dozens. You could tell where all the cool birds were just by noticing where packs of people were clustered, binoculars raised.

I met people from all over the place. One told me- we just have two more days to finish “The List.” Apparently birding can get quite competitive! You're trying to observe more birds than the other folks. There are *rankings!* Many birders don't care about that. They just want to see if they can see more birds this year than they did the year before. And when the calendar turns over, time has run out.

On January 1, it all goes back to zero. People like me, who still struggle to identify a warbler, are at exactly the same starting point as the guy who has seen hundreds and hundreds of birds and led the rankings. January 1 resets all of us, at exactly the same place. A fresh start. Every year.

We love fresh starts, don't we? There is something so hopeful about a fresh year, a new job, or a new home. Soak it in, because that's right where we are now- a fresh new year, with everything ahead of us. But also remember, this fresh start, this wiping clean of the past, is exactly what Jesus offers us *every day of our lives*. Because he came, we don't have to be dragged down by our sins or failures. Jesus offers to clean the record. To set us, with all our failings and flaws, back to perfect. Wow! Perfect restoration!

January 1 is a great day. But even better to know this eternal truth, and let it soak in: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." –2 Corinthians 5:17

You are a new creation. The old stuff is in the past. And your heart, your soul, your very life is being made new.

In honor of that newness, here are some of the exciting things ahead and a bit about the beautiful ministry that closed out 2020:

- There is going to be a new, exciting sound at FUMC- the ringing of bell chimes! The people of Myers Park UMC in Charlotte, NC have gifted us three octaves of brand-new bell chimes, pads and music!! This is an incredible gift that allows FUMC to form our first ever bell choir! Not only are they gifting us a brand-new set of bell chimes, but their bell- guru is going to work with us, online, to learn how to make music with them. They chose to help us because they know FUMC will not only play these bells in worship, but will find ways to take bell music out into the community. Bell chimes make a lovely sound, but are more durable and travel more easily. Would you like to learn to ring handbells? Let me know! Bells are the perfect musical activity for COVID and beyond!
- This December, FUMC provided the basic gift of life-sustaining food to thousands in our community through our Food Pantry, Emily's Meals (feeding the homeless in McAllen) and hundreds of families in the *colonias*. All told, we distributed **41,536 pounds of food!** Imagine! Forty-one *thousand* pounds of food to **2,833 people!!** Let that sink into your heart with joy. **Thousands of people had food last month because of the ministry of our church family!**
- One of the things we had to eliminate when we right-sized our church budget for 2021 was the hiring off-duty police to be on campus for Sunday mornings. In talking with members, we felt there were those in the church with the capacity, skills and willingness to be part of a Safety/Security Team for FUMC on Sunday mornings. If you'd like to know more or be part of this group, please contact Charlene Simmons, our Business Manager at

csimmons@mcfirst.com. Thank you for all you do to help serve our church!

- A family at our church happened to mention to me the benefit they found in giving stock to FUMC. What they shared was so lovely (and just plain useful information) that I asked if they would share what led them to give stock, so that others could know more about this avenue of generosity.

This is their story:

- “As a family and financial steward of our wonderful church, we have for many years donated shares of company stock to the church in place of cash donations. Stock held more than one year can be transferred from a personal account to a church brokerage account in the form a donation (shares transferred not sold). This method of giving has several advantages. First, the value of the stock once received by the church is tax deductible in a similar fashion to donating cash. A second benefit is that there are no capital gains taxes on the appreciation in the value of the stock if you’ve held it for more than 12 months. For example, say one purchased 100 shares at \$50 per share of stock, a \$5000 total investment. After holding this stock for thirteen months let’s assume the value increased to \$80 per share. Now the original investment is worth \$8,000. Donating the 100 shares to our church results in a \$8,000 gift, even though the actual cost of the stock was just \$5,000. The full \$8,000 is tax deductible and there is no capital gains tax liability. On the other hand, if this stock had been electively sold, the sale would generate a capital gain of \$3,000 which is subject to federal capital gains taxes. We love to support our wonderful church with gifts of appreciated stock.” - A FUMC family
- If you’d be interested in learning more about donating your stock, we have two members who can help you do just that. Just reach out to our Financial manager, Charlene Simmons: csimmons@mcfirst.com and she can get you in touch with one of them.
- Our first Family Movie Night with a big screen was such fun. Several families gathered on the lawn to enjoy “The Star,” a lovely Christmas story. The weather was perfect and everyone present had a wonderful time. We will do more of these outdoor movie events in the future!



- I thought you'd appreciate an end of year financial update. We finished December by covering over expenses. As you likely have already heard, we were in quite a hole by mid-year, but with austerity measures and budgetary changes, we've held our ground. Our first priority in 2021, when we will have a budget that lines up with our giving trend, is to continue this trend and rebuild the lost operating capital. Most churches like to keep 3-6 months of expenses in reserve for unexpected emergencies (like global pandemics!). We'll work to rebuild that while also continuing the amazing ministry to our children, youth, adults and the surrounding community. Thank you, friends, for your faithful giving. This has been a hard year for so many, but we have made it through!
- Some of you have asked if you can still give towards your 2020 pledge. Yes! Just be sure to let us know that it's 2020 giving and we can accept it

through this Sunday, January 10. After that, we have to close the books and start looking at 2021.

- Our Wesley Nurse, Jacqui Harden, is starting a “Walk and Talk” group this January. They will use walking as a way to build health, and discuss Scripture, bringing body, mind and spirit together. If you’d like to start the new year by working on our fitness (spiritual and physical), reach out to her: jharden@mhm.org and 956.731.4300.
- There was just so much joy this Christmas Season. Here are some pictures of the events, ministry and worship that will lift your spirit:



Happy New Year, church family. We’ve made it through 2020! That’s a huge celebration indeed. Here’s to all the journeys God has ahead of us in this brand-new year.

Pastor Laura

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