

# Return

THE YEAR OF THE BIBLE

## Relational Discipleship – Still on Mission

Ray Anderson --- August 2, 2020

Well, good morning, people of Grace. It is great to gather with you in your living rooms.

I want to start this morning by expressing my appreciation to someone on our staff. This month is the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jeremiah Ebeling joining our staff. For those of you who don't know, Jeremiah actually grew up here at our church. He was in our children's ministry and youth ministry. Can you imagine that when those people served in the children's ministry or the youth that they were starting the discipleship process for one of our pastors? Jeremiah is seated right over here. Thank you, Jeremiah, for your service among us, for your leadership on staff. He served as associate youth, he served as youth ministry pastor, he's been our family life pastor and our adult discipleship pastor, actually doing both of those roles this past year while he's working on his doctorate. Jeremiah, you have served well. I thank the Lord for you. I appreciate you being a co-laborer and a servant of God among us. Thank you very much, buddy.

### Introduction

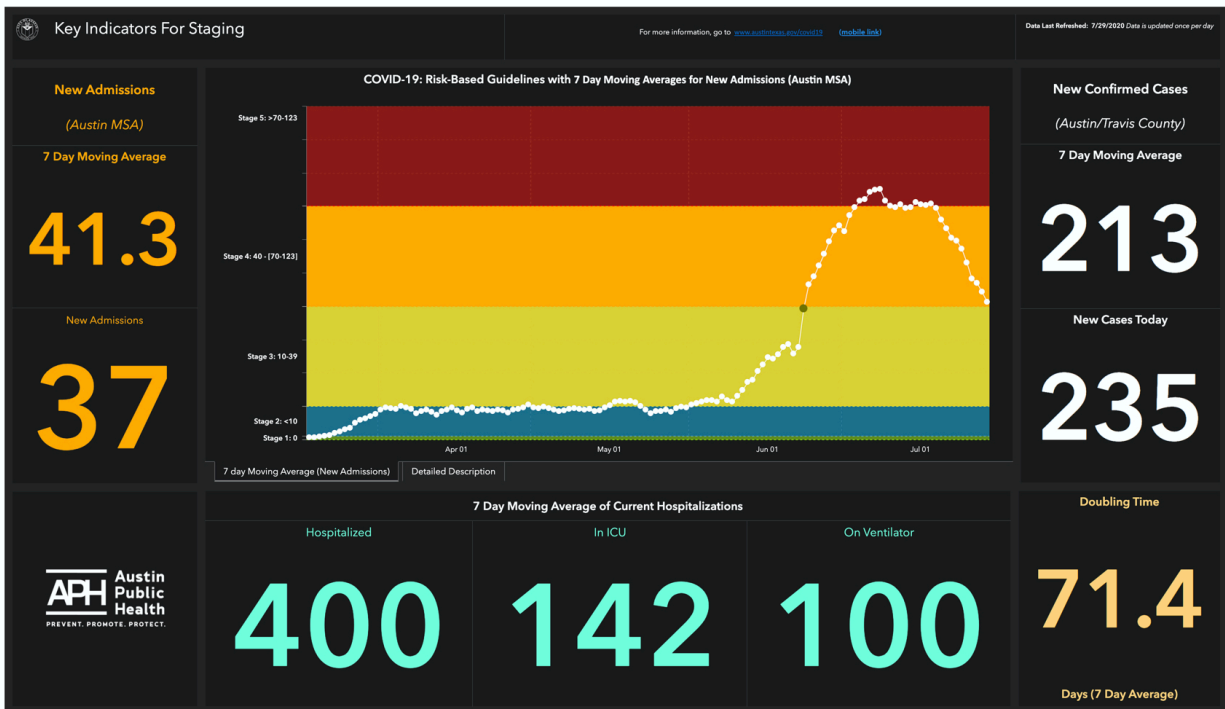
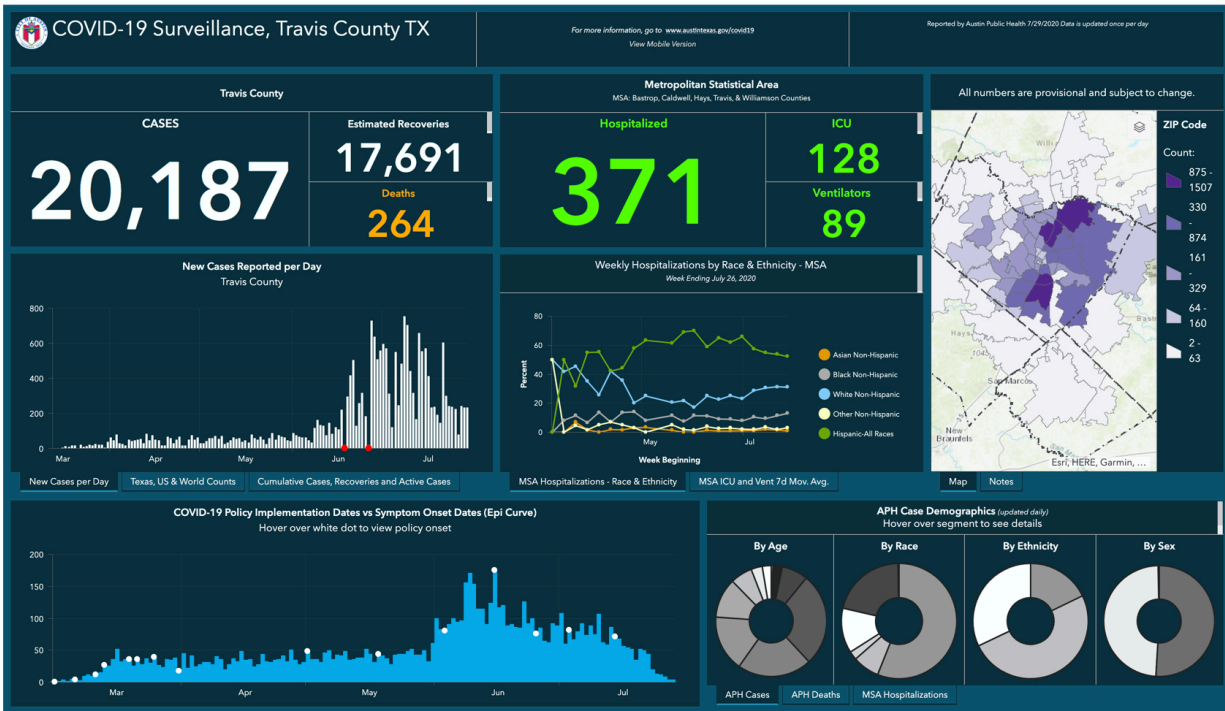
Today, I want to share my perspective on how we are doing. We've been in the middle of this whole thing now for an extended period of time. I want to be able to speak to you of what we are experiencing and how we're doing, and hopefully, to help you understand where we're going in preparing for the future.

It has been 146 days since we last gathered together on campus in a large group for fellowship and worship. **146 days!**

Back in March, before this whole thing hit our city, when I participated in a briefing for pastors with a public health official and an epidemiologist, they told us at that point to not go into this with a short-term mindset, that this thing could 90-120 days before we got some semblance of normal again. **Wrong!**

Well, if you've been following the data that they provided us, it can get a little confusing.

Here are the Travis County simplified Covid-19 dashboards:



Well, I think that one tells us that we're doing a little bit better than we have been for the last weeks, but it's hard to follow. There's so much confusion and confusing

information going on. But if you can't understand the dashboard, certainly you've been able to follow the kind of instructions that have been given in order for you to stay safe during this time and help us to collectively suppress this virus.

This is kind of what it sounds like:

**We want you to stay at home unless you need to leave your home to go get essential items. Or unless you're an essential worker, and the reason you'll know you're an essential worker is because you can't do your work from home and you have to go somewhere to do that. And go out for essentials, but we want you to know that there's really no toilet paper shortage; we just seem to have misplaced a large quantity of it. But we'll find that and get back to you and make that available to you. And then there's this whole mask thing. Don't wear masks; save those for the medical workers who need those. Well, you might think of wearing a mask, because it might help. And you could actually make a mask at home with a bandanna and rubber bands and wear that—only if you have to go out, wear that mask. Well, no, we'd really like you to consider wearing that mask—no, we really want you to wear that mask. Please wear the mask whenever you have to go out. Unless you don't really like wearing a mask and don't feel like you look good in a mask. And so, don't wear a mask. But we'd ask you, if you don't want to wear a mask, would you please stay at home? We'll bring you your toilet paper.**

It's a crazy time... a crazy time. And there is so much emotion swirling during this time and we have to acknowledge this gambit of emotions that is going on in people's lives—the fear, the anxiety, the anger at times, the confusion..... but for us who know the Savior, we hear His sweet voice in our ears. And He says this to us:

[John 14:26-27](#)

[“But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and He will remind you of everything I have said to you. <sup>27</sup> Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”](#)

**We have a great Savior to walk with us, to guide us, through this season of time.**

## Leadership

I have been in leadership positions since my senior year in high school. I've never seen such a time of uncertainty or chaos. There's no doubt there will be many research papers written on what was done well and what was not done well during this time. But that will all be after the fact. Right now we have to lead in real time.

And I'm certainly glad that I don't have to lead alone in the midst of this. Grace, we are an elder-led church. This group of godly men provide leadership for us during this time. They love and care for the church. They gather twice a week, on Tuesday and Sunday mornings, virtually and when possible, in person, to pray for the church, to pray for us, to pray for you!

They are concerned about our well-being. They provide wise and biblical counsel to Matt and me as we lead the staff and lead the ministries. They are shepherds of this flock.

This is what Paul told the elders of Ephesus in Acts 20:

### Acts 20:28

“Keep watch over yourselves.” (The term is actually “be on guard” for yourself.)  
Be on guard over all the believers. The Holy Spirit has made you leaders over them. Be the shepherd of God's church. He bought it with his own blood.”

In Proverbs 27, it says:

### Proverbs 27:23

“Be sure you know the condition of your flocks, give careful attention to your herds;”

Now in order for a shepherd to be able to do that, he has to be among the flock; he has to pass through them. It's not some higher vantage point where they get and look down on the flock. They have to be among them and walk through them. These men know that they're going

to answer to God for how they lead us. So, pray for them. It's not easy, but they are certainly not looking to themselves for that wisdom. They are looking for wisdom from above, from the good and gracious shepherd that we follow.

**So today I want to answer the question, how are we doing as a church in an upside-down world?**

Well, as I reflected on that, to answer this question, we have to go back to what our core purpose is and what our core values are. So, we define our core purpose as:

To glorify God by guiding people to become like Christ in all of life

Our core values are to be:

Transformed by Grace and Biblical Truth

Committed to Relational Discipleship

Engaged in Ministry

**See, we are seeking to fully align with Jesus' command to us in Matthew 28:18.**

There it says:

“Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. *{I am the sovereign Lord. I have a plan and the power to accomplish that plan, is what that sentence means.}*<sup>19</sup> Therefore **go and make disciples** of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,<sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And as you go, surely, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Matthew 28:18-20

If we're not at the end of the age, it means He's still with us. He still has a plan. He's still executing that plan. He's still on mission.



The philosophy of our ministry is built around this concept of **relational discipleship**. Relational discipleship is in the center of our bubble, our circle. The ministries around it are to align themselves and reflect that same concept of relational discipleship.

Here's how we define what relational discipleship is:

**We are a community of believers where the Holy Spirit helps us become like Christ in all of life by the application of Scripture within the context of relationships.**

It's three components:

**Spirit + Truth + Relationships**

Now we have not been able to gather for worship on campus for these 146 days here on campus to worship. But I want you to know and understand: we're still on mission.

If our diagram looked like this where worship was in the center of it and all the ministry centered around worship,



we would be having great difficulty fulfilling that core purpose. Worship is a part of what we do ... it's not the core purpose of what we do.

We are here:

[To glorify God by guiding people to become like Christ in all of life](#)

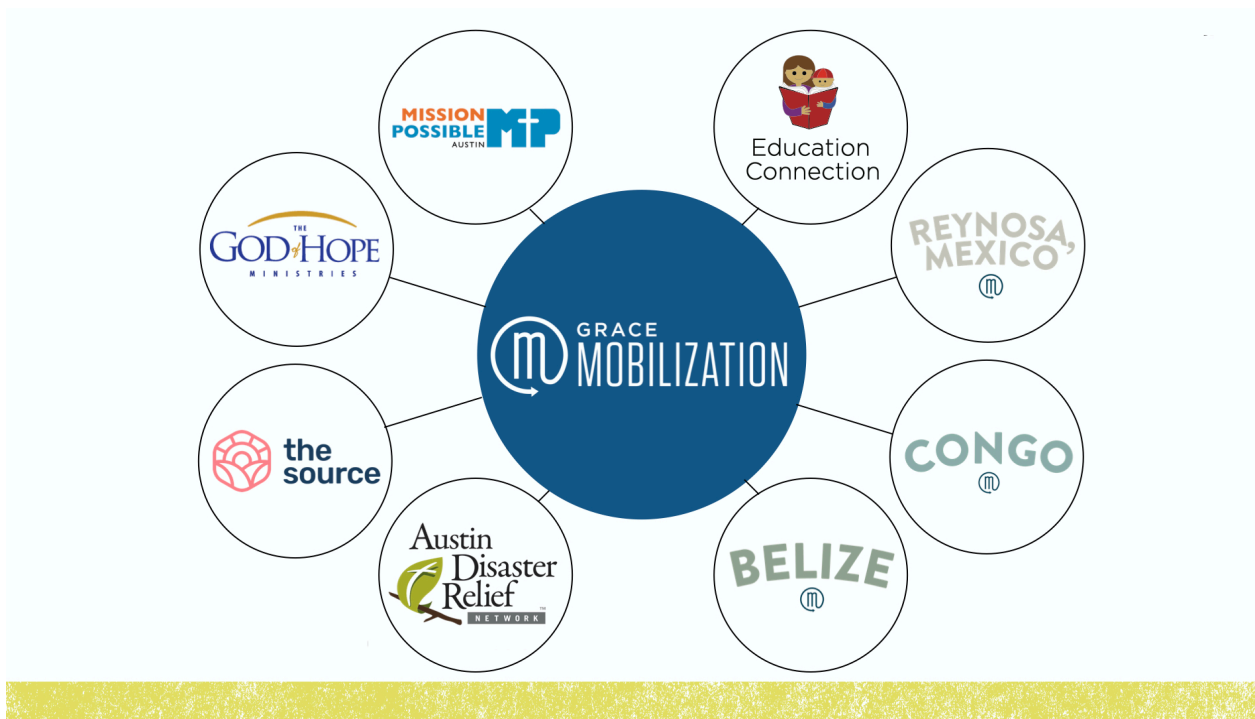
Part of my work as executive pastor is to help the pastors and the ministry leaders to make sure that their ministries are in line with that; that they're focused on those kinds of things and relational discipleship, and their ministry reflects that.

So, let me give you an example of how we use this to evaluate a ministry or guide a ministry. I'm going to use missions as an example here initially.

For several years we've been re-evaluating our strategy of how to engage our congregation in missions, both internationally and locally. We've actually, subtly—you may not have noticed it yet—change the name of Global Outreach to Mobilization.

## We have renamed Global Outreach/Missions effort to Mobilization

- i. We are still very committed to supporting our world outreach and relief effort through our 80 missionaries around the world and the 13 other organizations we support. But we felt we need to do more the engage our people, our congregation, in missions locally and internationally.
- ii. So, using the concept of relational discipleship, we began to re-evaluate and look at what we're engaged with. See, we want to have **relational partnerships** with organizations that will involve our people as volunteers and our money as support, but focus relationally and spiritually.



- iii. If you go to our website in the Mobilization area, you'll see a number of organizations listed there. Each of these organizations have been vetted. Their primary ministry is relational discipleship too, to particular audiences that they focus on. When you volunteer for one of these efforts, you're going to get involved in relational discipleship to a particular target group.



Let me use an example in Mission Possible. **Mission Possible** started as a ministry of Grace Covenant Church. And for 25 years we've had people on staff there and volunteering there to serve the needs of people in East Austin. They do a great job with the homeless, with low-income families in East Austin and Pflugerville. If you volunteer with them—and there are many ways for you to do that—you'll get connected into relationships for the purpose of having spiritual conversations. That's an expression of relational discipleship in missions.

I could go through each one of these organizations and explain to you how that's true. They do relational discipleship. That's why we partner with them.

So that illustrates how we engage with relational discipleship in our core purpose and our values. But we can't lose sight of what God has called us to do as a church.

**So, in the middle of a pandemic, are we on track?**

## **Shepherding the Flock**

During the last four months we have not been idle. The day before we sent our staff home to work from there, we adopted a thematic goal for the pandemic season. It was one word:

**THRIVE.**

See, we didn't want to just survive the pandemic; we wanted to thrive during it. We are still focused on the things God has called Grace Covenant to do and to be. So, let me show you how that's still true. We're still on mission.

During this time, we've certainly been working around the campus:

II. Preparing for our return to on campus ministry:

- **Our physical campus:**

- The **parking lot** is ready to use whenever we can come back.
- We are **live stream our services** each Sunday morning. This is live.
- We are building a **new classroom** in the Grace360 building.

- We are **installing what's called a bipolar ionization system** into our HVAC systems or our buildings so that we can clean the air of viruses, mold and allergens so we can have a healthier place to meet when we gather.
- We have **set up and are testing**, even today, **systems so that we can get people safely in here**. That dot means I've been properly screened to be in this room. Thank you for letting me in.

We are doing these things to return to campus. We continue to be focused on core purpose and our core values. We are still continuing to guide people to become like Christ in all of life.

III. We are still connecting people relationally with the Spirit – the Word and fellow believers.

a. We are doing that virtually; we are doing that face to face. And we're doing it by caring for our flock. We've been connecting people.

1. **Virtually** has certainly been an option for us. I know virtual meetings are not the same as face to face, but they are better than not meeting at all.

We've had Quest groups, Women's Bible Studies, MOPS groups, racial awareness discussions, Re-Engage , Celebrate Recovery, some of our community groups have continued to meet virtually during this time, and we'll continue to do so. They do it to stay in touch with one other and to encourage one another to hang in there in the midst of all that we're going through. Grace is not shut down. We're on mission.

We've actually had **new people join into these groups** and have had increased participation because it is virtual. I'm thankful for the technology.

In March, I think we had one Zoom account. I think we have nineteen now to service the ministries across the board to continue to meet.

Virtual isn't our only plan, but it will probably continue to be part of our plan in the future while we stay on mission. Let me give you an example.

We had ministries that went on break back in May, like MOPS or Quest. But people didn't want a break connecting relationally during the summertime. So, they continue to meet even past the end of the semester. MOPS leaders are calling people up during the course of the week to encourage them, to help these young moms stay on track, to stay engaged, to not give up, to not lose hope.

God used a Zoom call with the elders to bring healing and reconciliation with a family had gone through a long-term struggle. I'm thankful for the technology. It's just a tool that God has given us to stay on mission, to stay connected relationally, to still encourage one another to walk with God. Because guiding people to become like Christ is part of who we are. It's what we're supposed to be doing. We're still doing that. We're doing it virtually, but we're also doing it face to face.

**2. Face-to-Face Gatherings:** Let me tell you some stories about how I'm so proud of what's going on. We have had limited face-to-face gatherings, but they're still happening.

- We have had ministry leaders come up here and do a tailgate in our parking lot.
- We've been able to make arrangements for our Celebrate Recovery to be back on campus to minister to those in need at this time while remaining socially distant.

- Last week, 95 of our youth and 25 of our adult leaders went to camp for five days. They're all safe; they're all healthy. We're thankful for that.
- Those that are comfortable with gathering face to face have done so in their **backyards or at the end of their driveways and here in the parking lot or in our courtyard**. Almost any time you can come by here and find people meeting at the picnic tables.
- Like you, they see themselves as ministers and they're turning front porches into counseling rooms. They're turning casual conversations with neighbors at the end of their driveway into an opportunity to offer hope to those who are weary and discouraged. That what ministers do.
- People who have the skill and the joy of baking and cooking are turning that into a ministry of encouragement. We've certainly received those, and I want to thank those people with those skills.
- You're nice people, Grace! You always ask people, "How are you doing?" But you've changed that question during this season. You're asking it twice. You're saying, "How are you doing?" to your coworkers. "No, really—how are you doing?" You're not accepting their polite dismissive "I'm okay, I'm good." No, you want to know how they're doing. And by asking one question twice, you find that people open up and share with you how they're really doing and what their real needs are and their anxieties and their fears and their stresses and their concerns. You are ministers in the workplace by a simple question.
- Our church hasn't stopped; we've just decentralized during this season. We've told you for years that **"I'm just a pastor, and you're the ministers."** You're doing it. Look at you now! Look at the way you're ministering in the midst of a pandemic!
- I'm so proud of you. I'm proud of what I hear what you are doing to minister to others.

Do you see what I'm trying to say? We're still on mission, Grace. It doesn't matter if we can't gather here on Sunday morning. We're still engaged in

relational discipleship virtually and face to face. We're still engaged in personal ministry in our neighborhoods and our workplaces. We're still engaged in:

**3. Caring for our flock:** There have been hard things that have gone on in the last four months. People are dying, not because of the virus, necessarily. But we've had to come alongside in very hard situations.

- A family lost their daughter in a tragic car accident early on. Their friends, people in our youth group, came by them and loved them. Because loving them through a hard thing and loss is what ministers do. I'm so proud of you. They held a prayer vigil in the hospital parking lot. They love because love is what a minister does.
- There are people in our congregation that have lost income. Mysteriously, money gets slipped in their mailbox. We've come alongside them and helped pay rent. We continue to minister to our flock.
- Marriage care: The pandemic has certainly put us in our homes; it's created stress in marriages. You've come alongside people to encourage them and minister to them. We're still on mission. We're still encouraging people to become like Christ in all of life, even in their marriage. Our Re-Engage marriage discipleship ministry is still very open. We've actually added new people in the course of this by doing it virtually. If you need help, get help, whether that's financially or in your marriage.
- Hurts, Habits and Hang ups: Some people are struggling personally. The stress of this whole season, the isolation of it, is causing those things that we try to keep down and suppress in our lives, hurts, habits or hang-ups, to come to the surface. We thought we had it licked, but we don't. And we need a supportive system. Celebrate Recovery is still here on Thursday

evenings. The leaders are coming alongside people to minister to them, because that's what disciples do. That's what ministers do.

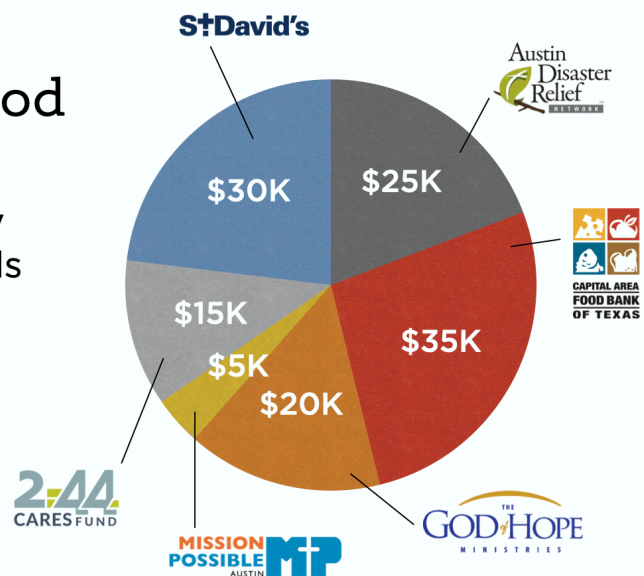
- **We are still on mission.** We are still guiding people to become like Christ in all of life. We're still connecting people in relational discipleship.
- We are still coming alongside in our flock and meeting their specific emotional, spiritual and tangible needs for support.

We are not just being the church into ourselves here. We've stepped in to care for the greater Austin community in more ways during this season.

### Doing Good in the Neighborhood

## Doing Good in Our Neighborhood

We have given away **\$130,000** to community groups serving the needs of our community.



- IV. **We've sought to do good in the neighborhood, as we call it:**
- a. We have sought to look actively for ways that we can serve our community during this time of need.

- i. The combination of the pandemic, the economic downturn, racial tensions and political turmoil have certainly created particular needs for us to meet, to address. They can't all be met at once or completely or quickly.
  - ii. But we've made a conscience decision to get our resources, our people, and our money into the hands of those groups in Austin that we think minister well people in need.
- b. Over the last four months we have committed \$130,000 over and above our normal giving to these organizations, because we feel like supporting them serves our community well.
  - i. **ADRN** – Austin Disaster Relief Network crosses racial and ethnic lines to meet real needs at critical moments in people's lives. I think from my perspective they have done more than any other organization to get the whole church of Austin--white, black, Hispanic, Asian, rich or poor--to work together to serve for the good of our city. ADRN would tell you it's not them. They're just a network. They are the church of Austin engaged in service.
  - ii. **Capital Area Food Bank** -- We've given to the food bank because there's a lot of needs out there. We've volunteered twice to help pack their boxes. The money we've been able to give them has provided food for hundreds of households.
  - iii. **God of Hope Prison Ministry** – What a great ministry. They do relational discipleship in the context of the Travis County jail systems, both in the male and the female units. They had a need. They'd lost their women's ministry director and that ministry was in jeopardy of continuing for this year. We wanted to step into that and help give them funds so they could

confidently step out in faith and hire that person so ministry could happen, relational ministry could happen.

- iv. **Mission Possible** – I've already mentioned them. We gave to their benevolence because they're in contact with families in needs. Many of you volunteer with the Restoration Art Center over in Pflugerville. Those families that you minister to, the moms and the children, are without income and there was a need to be met.
  
- v. **2:44 network** – Let me explain this 2:44 network. At the beginning of the pandemic, it became recognized that there were going to be churches in need because of the economic impact of the pandemic. So ADRN in partnership with the churches and a Christian business leader set up a fund. And that fund was used to be able to help churches of color keep their lights on and to have resources so they can minister in their communities. We wanted to be a part of that.
  
- vi. **St David's Staff** project – We have a project we're rolling out this week with the St. David's Hospital staff on 38<sup>th</sup> Street. There are 1200 of their staff that are involved in caring for and serving the COVID patients of that hospital. We have an opportunity to write thank-you notes to them. And we're going to put in gift cards so that we can encourage them and affirm them, because they're on the front lines of this pandemic. Look for more information about that this week.
  
- c. **Your Generosity**: See, it's because you've continued to be generous as a congregation that has allowed us to be generous in our neighborhood, in our community. I'm so encouraged each month when I get our financial report. We brace for the worst. We plan for it. But each month you have continued to give generously. And that has allowed us as a church to be generous to our community.



We are still on mission, Grace. We're guiding people to become like Christ in all of life. We're engaging people in relational discipleship. We're engaging people to engage in personal ministry.

- A pandemic, economic downturn, racial tension or political turmoil has not stopped us from being the church that God has asked us to be, that He has called us to be.
- Through your participation, your service, your giving, we are being disciples and ministers to the glory of our God.

I'm proud of you! I'm proud of who you are and what you've expressed in this season of time.

Now I know there's still this lingering question of when we will be **Gathering for worship services back on Sunday morning**. And we will get there.

- We don't see that fully happening until probably mid - September. We know that there are churches that are doing that and are doing just fine. We know there are other churches, like us, that are choosing to wait and not meet yet. Some of you are ready to return and some are not.
- Now you might disagree with this path, but know that we are not **operating of fear**. We are still fully focused on what God has called us to do, our purpose and values as a church. Our eyes are clearly fixed on Jesus.
- We're going to continue to monitor the conditions in Austin, we'll seek wise counsel. But above all else we're seeking to follow the Good Shepherd, the Good, Great Shepherd, who loves us and is taking care of us
- The leadership will continue to look at what is in the best interest of the broader flock that we serve and lead.

## Exile – Return -- Build

Over the last two weeks Matt and I in our sermons have explained to you the unique period in the Jewish history called the exile, the return, the rebuilding.

- I talked to you about what was most important to God is to have a heart fully devoted to Him.
- Matt last week shared from Nehemiah the three key attributes that we should all be cultivating, that are good for us and that are good for the kingdom of God well: Courage, Humility and Perseverance.
- In both of those sermons we've appealed to you to use this season of time to prepare yourself for our return and rebuilding.

Thrive ... thrive. You have permission to thrive during this time, not just survive it.

## Application

I know it's hard. There are still an unknown number for days ahead of us before this pandemic will be over. No matter how long this season lasts, we as a church will stay on mission because that's what God has called us to do. That's what He's called you to do. We'll continue to:

1. Guide people to become like Christ in all of life through relational discipleship.
2. Engage people in personal ministry.
3. Encourage people to be transformed by God's grace and by biblical truth.

Let's all stay on mission together.

As we come into the fall season, we relaunch our ministries. And we'll do that. We will start out virtually, and as soon as we can move on campus, we will. So I want to encourage you to continue to make the choices you can make.

1. **Choose to Be Engaged in Relational Discipleship:** Those of you who just come here for worship only, please join us in relational discipleship opportunities. Look at our website, look at those opportunities. Get in groups so that you can be connected relationally with other believers, you can be connected with God's Spirit and with God's Word.
  
2. I want to encourage you to make the choice to be **Engaged in Ministry:** Continue to look for those opportunities to engage with neighbors or your co-workers or your family members. Seek ways to pray for them, to care for them and to share hope, love and grace with them.
  - Minister to them with compassion and understanding. You know what it feels like to be fearful, to be anxious, to be angry or disappointed or stressed, to be confused or overwhelmed. But what you have that they don't have is God's Spirit. It's God's truth. It's the supportive community around you.
  
  - See, you as a minister get to whisper in their ear in the midst of their anxieties and fears and discouragement and stress the words of Jesus:

**“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”**      **John 14:27**

We're on mission, Grace. Let's pray.

*Father, I thank You for the people of Grace. I thank You for the Holy Spirit who indwells us, for the Word of God that guides us, for the opportunities You provide virtually and face to face and in ministry to care for one another and to serve our community during this time. Father, You led us into this in Your sovereignty and You will lead us through it. Help us to stay on mission so that we can glorify You. Thank You, Lord, for Your grace and Your care and Your*

*love, Your comfort and guidance. Let us draw on Your wisdom from above to live in these days.  
We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

I look forward to seeing you face to face.