



SNAPSHOTS

ISSUE 1 • JUNE/JULY 2021



WHAT'S SNAPSHOTS?

If you want to get technical, a snapshot, as defined by Merriam Webster, is "an impression or view of something." Of course, that's probably not news to you. It probably also wasn't your question. You want to know what this document is. The dictionary doesn't define that, but we can.

"Snapshots" is a new publication from the Presbyterian Church of Toms River. It will arrive in your inbox or mailbox about 6 times a year to share snapshots of how God is at work within our community, our church, and our friends. It will celebrate with gratitude the way God is at the center of all things.

It's your story. It's our story. But most of all, it's God's story.

PCTR
NEWSLETTER

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TENDING SEEDS AND LIFE RENEWED

ROBBIE YTTERBERG

Six or seven years ago, we started planting vegetable gardens in our backyard. I love the taste of these home-grown organic vegetables, especially the tomatoes, squashes, and peppers! Often, Abby will start them from seeds, and I marvel at the miraculous growth. Some will shoot right out of the ground; others take longer to germinate. Either way it is amazing to see life and growth come from something so small.

Over the last 2 months, through our sermon series, "Renewed: Life After Disaster," we have been considering

how God can work something similar in us, bringing life, growth, vitality, and richness. We long to see God work a beautiful and new thing in our lives individually, our life together as a church, and in our neighborhoods, families, schools, workplaces, and beyond!

The seeds Abby plants need to be tended. They need to be watered, weeded, fertilized, and protected. Our lives need to be cultivated similarly if we want to open ourselves to renewal. We intentionally discern our priorities, manage our schedules, invest our time, energy, and resources, face our fears, leverage our influence, confess our sin and receive grace, and desperately seek God in prayer.

We can only do so much to help our seeds grow. In the end, we are dependent on the sun, temperatures, and other things outside of our control. It is also true as we seek renewal, we make ourselves available but only God can bring growth and transformation.

In this and subsequent editions of Snapshots, we hope to share stories of renewal; of how God is at work transforming and healing, using us to reach the hurting and lost with the good news of Jesus, and leading us to invest in further renewal. We hope you will enjoy and celebrate the goodness of God.

I am so grateful to be with you all on this journey and am eager to see how God will use us to bring the hope of Jesus Christ to our world that is in desperate need of renewal!

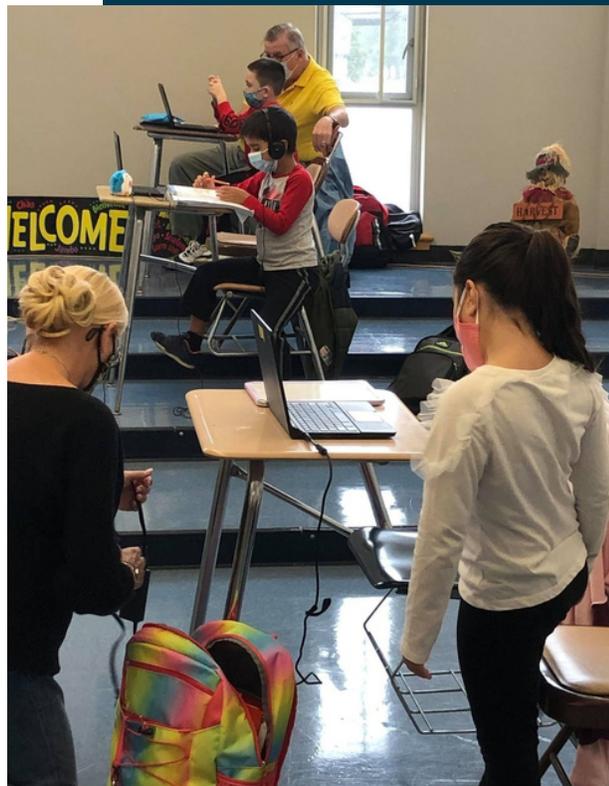
Peace-
Pastor Robbie Ytterberg



PCTR GOES TO SCHOOL

In September 2020, school returned to session... sort of. In the heart of the pandemic, Toms River Regional Schools and others in our community would start the 2020-2021 school year virtually. While online classes presented a host of challenges for many students and staff, for families without reliable internet access this meant school was simply not accessible. For families with child care needs, it presented the challenge of having an adult at home and available to help students access class and stay focused on the virtual school day.

At Walnut Street Elementary School, as an example, within the first week of school 35 families were identified as being at risk for falling through the virtual cracks. These children hadn't logged in to class and there was great concern that they'd continue to fall further behind as the school year got underway in earnest.



Our church had an existing relationship with Walnut Street Elementary School. In previous, non-pandemic years, volunteers from the church met with students twice a week as part of the Homework Club to encourage and support students. Volunteers from the church have also helped maintain the school's gardens at various times. This unique season called for something more.

A task force of volunteers, supported by Session, began to consider what it might look like to step into this gap and support Toms River families left behind in the transition to online school during a pandemic. "As a teacher with Toms River Schools for over 20 years, I was very enthusiastic about this opportunity. I was aware of the need. I knew these students were at risk of falling between the cracks and we want to see them succeed," shared Nadia Herman, who was part of the initial planning team, and worked with the students daily once things got off the ground.

Staff at Walnut Street Elementary School identified students in grades K-2 who were at high risk of falling behind in a virtual setting and invited them to register for PCTR's School Link. Participating students would attend virtual school on-site at the church. Our volunteers would ensure the children were connected to their classrooms properly and would encourage them to participate fully in their virtual school day. On September 21, School Link volunteers and students took their seats in the large rehearsal room and logged in to class together.

"I was hesitant at first," said Sandy Ross about his decision to serve as a School Link Volunteer. "I never felt called to teach children. It was just about availability. I recognized that there were fewer volunteers than we needed and I was able to help. So, I did. Over the course of time I was involved, it morphed into an enjoyable, worthwhile thing."

SCHOOL LINK CONTINUED

Sandy continued, "We didn't teach. We helped the students connect to their class and stay focused on their tasks. Going into it, no one knew what to expect. Over time, we built a relationship with the kids. They connected with us. They brought us pictures. I'd like to think it was a positive impact for the kids too."

Nadia agreed, "It became such a family, all revolving around the friendships formed here. The parents were so grateful they had a place to come where the children were safe, and they felt like they were getting the help they needed. We even had positive feedback from the teachers too. They were grateful for School Link!"

The program evolved as the school year progressed. As students were welcomed back to in-person classes on a limited basis, the program shifted hours of operation to match the changing schedule. When students returned to class 5 days a week, School Link ended. Looking back on the experience, Nadia shared some of the ways she saw God at work through School Link, "God is always present. He definitely directed our steps. The Holy Spirit was very much active in this program. When we had speed bumps with technology, connecting to the internet, getting on to the Chromebook, getting into the right lesson, we always found a way to solve the problem." She continued, "And I think the Holy Spirit was working on bringing people together. To bring these children into our lives. We built a relationship with the families and the children. We keep in touch still. They still share their news with me. A mom called me the other day to ask me to help her child with a school lesson and I was happy to do that. Some of the students are planning on coming to Vacation Bible School this summer! God is good. God is Awesome! I'm very excited about that.

When asked what advice he'd offer others considering an opportunity to serve, Sandy said, "Pray about it. Discern whether it's God's will to put you there. I decided to give this a try and if it didn't work out well, at least I tried. Generally speaking, it's the willingness to put yourself out there that's the hurdle, but clearing that hurdle is also the biggest sign that it will work."



"You have to let go of the control and know that God is in control. He'll equip you with what you need. We have to learn to surrender our lives and be obedient to the calling. Trusting in the Lord is what it's all about," added Nadia.

Our volunteers look forward to continuing the relationship with the families and staff at Walnut Street Elementary. As pandemic restrictions lift, conversations will begin about new service opportunities at the school, as well as other opportunities to serve within our community. If you're interested in volunteering for one of our local mission opportunities going forward, send an email to office@pctr.org or call 732-349-1331.

WHAT DOES FREEDOM MEAN?

What would *you* do with an extra \$15,500 a month? What could *PCTR* do with that? That's the question we began to consider in 2019 when we launched the Freedom Campaign with an eye on paying down the church's mortgage. Two years into our campaign, we're seeing the way God has been at work in you and in us as we pursue freedom FROM debt so that we may be free TO love God's people more fully.

YOU, MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS, WERE CALLED TO BE FREE. BUT DO NOT USE YOUR FREEDOM TO INDULGE THE FLESH; RATHER, SERVE ONE ANOTHER HUMBLY IN LOVE. ~ GALATIANS 5:13

Committing to this campaign took prayer and consideration. "To be honest, in the beginning, I was a little hesitant to jump on board. Having a mortgage isn't such a big deal, I mean think about it, how many of us church members have one. It's just a part of life, right? But in doing my due diligence, I did attend one of the informational meetings just to hear what this was all about. What blew me away is when I heard just how much money the church had left to pay on the mortgage. I didn't know what I would have thought to be an okay number to owe, but the number I heard was big, really big," shared Vivian Burns.

For others, the reason to give was clear. "It's always been a source of frustration that we weren't able to do the things that we felt God was calling us to do because of the budget," explained Judy Haas. To that end, paying off the mortgage would allow the church to shift budget allocations away from debt and toward the things we feel called to do.

FREEDOM FACTS

One Month's Mortgage payment is about **\$15,530**

That's roughly the equivalent of:

- A Full Year Scholarship for **2 Students** in Camden to attend Urban Promise's School
- OR
- Sending **44 Students** to church camp this summer
- OR
- Providing **77 Chromebook Computers** to students, families or Seniors in need
- OR
- **620 Pairs of chickens** for villages in Malawi Through Villages in Parntership

FREEDOM CONTINUED

Vivian echoes that sentiment, "Imagine the doors that could open for us. What would we do with that extra money? I bet we could do a lot. Just think of how much we were able to do as a church during the pandemic! The outreach to our members and the community was amazing. And how we kept in touch via technology was a real feat. So I was sold on helping to get that mortgage down and in a few years, see it gone. Then PCTR could really make a difference not just in our church ministry but in community outreach programs and projects. When we build our community we also build our church's presence in it."

Of course, feeling the call to pursue financial freedom as a congregation is different from feeling equipped to make an impact as an individual. \$1.8 million is a daunting figure, after all. Even knowing this campaign was going to require a group effort, some wondered about their own ability to contribute regularly in a way that would make a difference. "One of my first personal thoughts was how am I going to give more than I am already giving. I am recently retired. I am widowed. I'm on a fixed budget. I didn't take the decision to give extra lightly," shared Judy, who explained that she has her regular offering set up for automatic payments from the bank to ensure she's giving to God through the church first. She continued, "In the end, because I saw how much this mortgage was holding us back, I felt I can't not give. If everyone gives, it will be taken care of."

The Freedom Campaign reminds us that God is faithful. Having prayerfully considered her pledge, Judy stepped out in faith and God responded. "There's a point where you're trusting God to provide for the church, but we are the ones that He's calling on to make those provisions," Judy said, "I figured out what amount I could give. I have it taken out the first of every month and it's done. Honestly, God has been faithful. I feel like I'm living the same way I was before. He's finding a way to make it happen."

THERE'S A POINT WHERE YOU'RE TRUSTING GOD TO PROVIDE FOR THE CHURCH, BUT WE ARE THE ONES THAT HE'S CALLING ON TO MAKE THOSE PROVISIONS ~ JUDY HAAS

When the Freedom campaign launched in April 2019, we set a goal of paying off \$1.8 Million of mortgage debt by 2023. By the end of December 2020, we had made additional payments totaling \$630,000 towards the principal of our loan. These additional payments saved about \$170,000 in interest on the loan. **To put that into context, the combination of what we've paid down so far, the interest savings and the pledges members have already committed to, we have eliminated nearly one million of our original debt.** With your faithful, prayerful contributions, we will be able to pay down the remaining \$800,000 by our original target date. We are grateful for every dollar contributed thus far. God can do great things with our individual gifts no matter how big or small they may be, especially when we work together.

If you'd like to pledge to the Freedom Campaign or make a donation to help pay down the mortgage, you can give online at pctr.org/give (select Mortgage Campaign) or mail your check to the church office and include "Freedom Campaign" on the memo line.

REUNION!

There are a lot of days that leave us bubbling over with joy and thanksgiving. The opportunity to gather for worship and fellowship together at REUNION on June 6th was one of those days. We brought chairs and blankets to sit on. We sat on branches in the trees. We sat in the shade and in the sun. We sang contemporary worship songs and traditional hymns. We prayed together. We shared communion. We celebrated our history of 50+1 years at 1070 Hooper Ave, building on a long history that began at our original location downtown. And then, when the benediction was said and the service was over, we stayed together to share a meal and reconnect after the long pandemic season that kept many of us apart. We look forward to more opportunities to be together in worship and fellowship!



REUNION! (CONTINUED)



SMALL GROUPS. BIG IMPACT!

The pandemic changed many things. Some things shifted on a temporary basis. Some things have changed forever. One thing that has remained the same, though, is that God can do great things through all things. He is "one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." (Ephesians 4:6).

Restrictions on gathering sizes prompted our ministry leaders to reconsider what it meant to study and fellowship together. Some groups moved to Zoom which allowed larger groups to continue meeting virtually despite various pandemic-related restrictions.

FOR WHERE TWO OR THREE GATHER IN MY NAME, THERE AM I WITH THEM. ~ MATTHEW 18:20

Virtual groups have their place, but they aren't the right fit for everyone or for everything. Recognizing the need for something more, our ministries prayerfully launched a series of experiments: Youth Small Groups, Family Groups, and Adult Triads & Quads. These small groupings of facilitators and members meet on a weekly basis to study together. To laugh together. To grow together in faith. Groups read scripture together and then talk about what the scripture is saying and how it relates to things in their own lives.

Jessica Festa has a unique perspective on the impact of these small group experiments. She's been a member of a Quad, she's one of the adult leaders of a youth small group, and she's the parent of a teen in another youth small group.



"I got to hear other people's perspectives about the scripture so I learned a lot more because it wasn't just what I was getting from it. I got to hear what other people were getting from it. Sometimes it was similar. Sometimes it was completely different," explained Jess about her experience as part of a Quad.

The four women in her small group had daughters around the same age which meant they were also able to connect as individuals in a similar place in life. She continued, "It helped us form new friendships. We got to talk about what was going on in our life that we needed prayers for and it was nice to have a safe place to talk about those things and to know that you were connecting to someone that really cared and wanted to pray for you. That carried through even after our small group ended."

SMALL GROUPS CONTINUED

Jess also partnered with Danielle Hovance to facilitate a group for four middle school girls. Similar to the format of the adult groups, the youth were able to connect with both the scripture and each other. Jess explained that in the beginning, the girls were quiet, but as time went on, the girls became more comfortable with the group. "They didn't feel like they had to hold back on what they were thinking. They were able to freely express what was on their mind and what was in their hearts because it was a small group and they could all trust each other," she said.

Jess's teen daughter is a member of another small group and as a parent, she's grateful for it. "I didn't have that when I was growing up. I didn't have someone to lead me in my faith that I felt like I had a close relationship with or that I felt like I could talk to. I feel like Keira has that and I am so grateful for it," said Jess.



Dan Redgrave and his son Gavin, a senior at High School North, joined Matt Hanson in facilitating a small group for some of our middle school guys. Each week the group would begin the evening with a round of basketball and then transition into a time to read and discuss scripture. "When Amanda asked us to lead a small group, our first thought was, what a great opportunity to spend quality time together learning new Bible passages while mentoring some spirited young middle schoolers," Dan shared. "We both really looked forward to going each week and found ourselves eager to see which passage we'd study. Matt had such good insight into the readings as well."

Dan considers his time with this group to be a blessing. "For us, it was a priceless time shared with each other away from the distractions of everyday life while learning about each other." The group dynamic itself contributed to its strength. When asked to share a benefit or strength of this particular small group, Dan said, "The beauty and unpredictability of multi-generational conversation."

Whether as a leader or a participant, jumping into a small group can be intimidating. "When Amanda asked me to help lead a small group, I was a little bit afraid because I wasn't sure I'd have the knowledge of the scripture to answer all the girls' questions," shared Jess, "but I decided God was calling me to do this and I was going to take the chance. I learn as much from the girls in our middle school group as they learn from me. I'm so glad that I did it. It doesn't have to be scary because it's just about connecting with other people and growing relationships with Christ and with others."

Although our family and youth small groups are on hiatus for the summer, groups for Adult Triads and Quads are being formed on an ongoing basis throughout the year. If you're interested in getting connected with a small group, call the church office or contact:

Adult Triads & Quads - Pat Grill, patg@pctr.org

Family Small Groups - Michael Barozzie, michaeleb@pctr.org

Youth Small Groups (Middle School & High School) - Amanda Hubler, amanda@pctr.org

THE GIFT OF TOGETHER

Mother's Day this year came with a special gift for our families and Children's Ministry leaders. It ushered in the return of Church School! It was a welcome change for our children, our parents, and our volunteers!

Children's ministry worked hard during the pandemic to maintain a connection between our young friends and their families. Encouraging their growing faith and relationships together certainly had its challenges during the last year, of course. As Cindy Nacca explained, "I have been teaching church since 1989. It has been a big part of my life every Sunday during the school year. Suddenly it stopped. I missed it deeply. Church also stopped for me, as babies can't be quiet during services...so online it was. That was no way the same, but it was something. I missed my church family."

Cindy was back in the classroom on Mother's Day. "It was a different time and different children than I used to see, but it was something. It's a start." As church school began before masks were optional and social distancing restrictions were lifted, students returned with some pandemic-era accommodations. "We couldn't see each other's smiles, but we saw it in their eyes. My granddaughter wanted to hug everyone, Jane welcomed her with open arms, saying 'you're worth the risk.' That phrase made our day. And, it makes the wait until we are back 100% a little easier."

"What a great morning!" agreed Jane Kahnt when asked about that first weekend back. "It was such a treat to reconnect with our children--they have grown so! We saw a lot of upbeat, enthusiastic faces--who seemed as happy to see us as we were to see them. Being back felt wonderful--a real step toward 'normal' -- and I'm giving thanks for all the teachers and volunteers who were so much a part of it!"

This new format requires more hands-on-deck, which means a unique (and FUN!) opportunity for volunteers to pitch in and help with Church School on an occasional basis. We're currently meeting at 10:30 each Sunday and we're looking for volunteers interested in assisting our teachers. Sign-up for a week, a few weeks, or more! Contact Michael at michaelbepctr.org or call the church office.

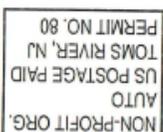


Be part of the story...

The stories on these pages are just some of the ways God has been at work in and through us. More importantly, they are just a taste of what's to come. God's got BIG plans! Come join us for the journey. Here are a few ways you can get connected and grow in faith in the coming months:

- Registration is now open for Vacation Bible School (August 16-20). Sign-up at pctr.org/vbs
- Volunteers are needed for VBS! Crew leaders, station helpers, pre-VBS set-up, and more. Contact Pat at patg@pctr.org for details!
- Ladies, we're making plans for this year's Women's Retreat (October 15-16), and NOW is the time to register. Stop by our website at pctr.org/womensretreat/ or contact Pat at patg@pctr.org.
- Our Youth Ministry folks are going to be busy this summer! Stop by pctr.org/youthevents to get the details of what our Middle School and High School crews have planned and to sign-up for all the fun!

If you'd like future issues of Snapshots emailed to you as a digital newsletter, please fill out the form at pctr.org/newsletter or send an email to office@pctr.org.



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