

Reports from Br. Benedict for the Annual Meeting for the year 2020, the thirty-seventh Annual Meeting in the thirty-eighth year of ministry, January 24, 2021. Revised 1-22-21

I. Pastoral Report

When I think of the year 2020 and Ray Of Hope Church, I think of dramatic change. Change that would call us to positive growth and opportunity.

As much as I pay attention to the news cycle I missed most warnings that may have been given in December 2019, January, or February 2020 regarding COVID-19 and the projected impact for our area, our church, our Country. Like other people, I did hear about a distant virus that was in China. I also heard our President call it “the Chinese Virus” but he also indicated it wouldn’t be coming “here.” In fact, Ray Of Hope Church participated in the ecumenical all-city Ash Wednesday worship event on February 26, 2020, at The Park Church with seven congregations without one mention of any thought of the Coronavirus. About 300 people attended at The Park Church and we sang hymns, sang in the choir, stood shoulder-to-shoulder, hugged for the Sign of Peace, received Holy Communion using common cups for intinction, and we shook hands. There was not a mask in thought, word, or deed! Tragically, the public would learn on September 9, 2020, that in fact in February 2020, before our worship event, the Executive Branch of the United States Government was already aware that this virus was coming and that it would have a disastrous impact on our society. This came to light with some tape-recorded phone conversations between our former President and Bob Woodward.

“President Donald Trump acknowledged the dangers of the coronavirus pandemic in a February interview with journalist Bob Woodward” Source: <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-told-bob-woodward-he-knew-february-covid-19-was-n1239658>

If the Elmira Area Clergy group had known then what it would find out through Governor Cuomo the week of March 16 – 20, our Ash Wednesday event at The Park Church would have looked much different than it did. Still, I am grateful we were there and participated fully in the service.

The first day I became aware that something was going off the tracks was Tuesday, March 17. Kaiden and I were on the way back from a doctor's appointment in Rochester. We stopped into En En Chinese Buffet in Corning, NY for dinner. At first, we thought the establishment was closed

because there were no cars in the parking lot. When we went in we found the food was on the buffet, piping hot, and everything in order. What we also noticed was there were no customers. The host looked surprised when we came in. He asked us more than once if we wanted to eat there. We thought that was unusual and kept looking at each other and we assured him we really did want to eat there. The food was wonderful. Again, there were no customers until we were about two-thirds finished, and then there were very few people there. While we were eating there was a special report from Governor Cuomo that played on a very large wall-mounted flat-screened television, where he explained the necessity of shutting down Broadway theatres, and gyms, and other places by 8:00 p.m. Wednesday the following night. This included the gym we were exercising at. We were all ears, to say the least. What we noticed was the employees of En En coming out of the kitchen and speaking to one another in an Asian language. We also noticed many started to cry and they were very upset. The announcement included the instruction that their establishment would also be closed. I tried to speak with some of the employees and offer some empathy and concern. They were very upset. We assured them when they reopened we would be back. As we drove home we suddenly realized why there were so few customers. This is a Chinese buffet and for weeks we had been hearing about the “Chinese Virus” that was killing people in China, but surely would not be coming here. We suddenly realized these Asian business owners had already been blacklisted and their establishment avoided. As we drove home we discussed this and we felt sad for them.

This is the moment I realized things were going to change and quickly. By Friday, March 20 our chapel would be closed to the public. The rest of this story is easily remembered by most of us who remained active in the year 2020 at Ray Of Hope.

Thankfully, what we have often said was coming true: “We have been rehearsing for this for years.” Rehearsing for what? Going completely virtual for all of our public ministry presentations. I am not going to relist and review all the different online platforms we have been through over the years. It is safe to say, we tried all of them that were readily available. Even at this time we were reviewing the differences between Skype and

Zoom and testing them both out before the new COVID-19 infection prevention policies were in place.

As is our usual way of doing things, we immediately called a special workshop of our leadership and put into place our COVID-19 infection prevention policies, out ahead of all local churches and even ahead of some businesses.

We smoothly transitioned to all online communications.

Here are some of the positive results of this year of radical change and necessary growth.

1) We have become all paperless. We are not printing bulletins, Council minutes, or any other form of communication. We have learned to post our weekly bulletins, worship materials, study materials, announcements, and everything else we would have printed on our website.

2) We have spent this year revising a new Worship Service #7. We took into consideration about two years of written suggestions, worked on further use of inclusive language, and added a narrative that introduces the persons leading the event each time a new person speaks. Using an all-electronic format allows for easier changes in the written service for special occasions and seasons of the church year.

3) We have finally started to use our Facebook page. One of the uses of this page is an easy location to store the recordings of our worship events. It is very easy to create the index for the recordings on our main website and provide the link to see the videos through Facebook. Housing our videos on Facebook also increases the opportunity for people to find Ray Of Hope on the Internet.

4) The laptop computer purchased in 2019 was not working well enough to handle our Skype meeting events in 2019 and most of 2020. We had extra RAM added to it, and had it evaluated by the Geek Squad, and even sent it out to Matt Luckner, Lisa's son to see if he could fine-tune it. After not being useful for almost a year it suddenly started working. We think this may have been due to some improvements with Skype caused by their

having to step up their performance due to COVID-19. So, we are happy to report that the last four or so months our Skype events from this chapel have indeed been on our new laptop computer.

5) We purchased a new webcam. Of course, our former webcam had to die in late February / early March when the demand for webcams went off the charts as students moved to at-home learning. Finally, Lisa and Veronica hunted one down and it is working great.

6) We have joined many other Christian LGBTQSIA+ + groups on Facebook. Many people are aware of our activities now who were not before COVID-19.

7) We maintained our participation in the Elmira Area clergy group. In the Summer, the area clergy were meeting once a week for most of June, July, and August. There were many discussions on how to handle COVID-19 infection prevention practices. At one point we thought we would be canceling our ecumenical worship events until COVID-19 was over. This is where Ray Of Hope stepped up to the plate. I was able to rally interest in having the entire October World Wide Communion Service in a virtual format.

8) On June 5, 2020, we participated in the Elmira Black Lives Matter Protest. We walked with other clergy-persons from the Elmira Area Clergy group and we carried our banner in the parade. We were seen on the local news with our banner in the air. We were the only local church or organization to come to the protest with a banner. There is a link to the news video on our website front page.

9) We were invited to co-sponsor a get-out-the-vote Public Service Announcement with the AIM Independent Living Center, and the local Black Lives Matter organizers. The video was played on local stations and is available to view from our website.

10) In September we participated in the final worship service of Trinity Episcopal Church here in Elmira. We assisted in the procession of their portable altar from Trinity to Grace Church.

11) We hosted the World Communion Sunday worship event on October 4, 2020. It took a lot of convincing but in the end, eight congregations participated with guests from all over the U. S. A. using Zoom and Facebook live simultaneously. The worship bulletin was our Service with participants from all of the eight congregations. The video is available for viewing on our video index page:

http://www.rayofhopechurch.com/worship_video_index.htm

12) We learned how to do our external ministries in new ways to keep people as safe as possible. People have even stopped by the front door and asked to receive Holy Communion during these times.

13) We celebrated Kwanzaa for the third year in a row. We did record each night, so all of the Kwanzaa services are found on our website's Kwanzaa page.

14) We also featured the celebration of Hanukkah live through Facebook Live and on our website. This was the first year we webcast Hanukkah.

15) We held the Inquirer's Class in 2020. Kaiden Rae Benedict, formerly known as Kenneth Richard Ryan joined the Congregation during the Vigil of the Resurrection.

16) Our Congregation was prayerfully present for every Sunday and additional Holy Days, all of Holy Week, and all of the Nativity celebration. Everyone invited friends and family to join us online for worship. We even had guests from other countries enjoying our online resources. The Members and Friends of this Congregation showed tremendous consistency in our witness to the priority of prayer and worship.

17) We also recognized the tragic loss of life that continued to increase as the COVID-19 emergency evolved into a global Pandemic. We brought people's concerns and prayers to our worship events and we prayed during the Prayers Of The People for many who requested our prayers. We called upon our Founders, Foundresses, Friends, the Faithful, and Family members who are in Paradise to join us in intercessory prayer for everyone around us, for scientists, for those serving and helping during these times. We sorrowed and we cried along with those who grieved the loss of loved ones. We also brought the unwavering message of the promise of the

resurrection for all and the Gospel fact that Jesus is the Lord of the living and the dead. (Romans 14:9)

All Pride celebrations in Central New York State were canceled due to COVID-19.

II. Bible Enrichment Sessions

Bible Enrichment continued on a steady schedule in 2020. We tried using the chapel with masks and social distancing. However, the fact is the Pandemic is increasing and is at its all-time record high in the United States at the time of the writing of this report. In July the sessions were therefore moved to the online format. This is working well for most of us, however, we are aware of at least one person who is not able to participate with the online format. The Bible Enrichment maintained attendance this year with a new basic core group of four weekly attendants. At Ray Of Hope Church, we are comfortable with a liturgical and a literal/prophetic study of Holy Scripture, using the best of study materials published and computer programs that assist with word-by-word translations. Our resources reflect our respect for all denominational positions as we search for the truth together. Most Pastors and Bible teachers are governed by denominational strict guidelines on Bible interpretation and application. At Ray Of Hope Church, we are free to explore and learn without those restrictions. We did a review of sexuality and the Bible, and a review of the introductory pages to our Statement of Faith, the Prologue, and used many of the summaries found on the topics of The Holy Spirit, The Church, The Blessed Hope, and The Millennial Kingdom during the year.

The Bible Enrichment was extended to the Sunday sermon series on Eschatology beginning on the Feast of Christ the King and ending on the Feast of the Nativity of Christ. The sermon notes were extensive and filled with resources for further reading. With the new online bulletin format, it is possible to add links to other external resources and places on our website where people may return to explore the topic further after worship. During this six-week series, we reviewed the impact of the lens through which a preacher reads, understands, and teaches the Holy Scripture concerning the Amillennial, Postmillennial, Premillennial, Realized Eschatology, or Spiritual interpretational approach. While Ray Of Hope Church does not have an official policy on the approach its licensed and ordained Pastors are to use, I clarified I definitely teach from a Premillennial perspective. I

enjoy comparing and contrasting the other approaches and often do so in sermons and teachings, However, my final station will always be Premillennial as it was the approach of the Apostolic and Post-Apostolic eras until the time of St. Augustine. It is always my goal to bring those along who want to learn some of the professional materials that are readily available. I love the questions!

III. Candles for Intercessory Prayer

There was no participation in this ministry in 2020.

IV. Elmira's "gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, str8, social group"

Unfortunately, we had to suspend this public activity beginning on March 20, 2020, due to our COVID-19 infection prevention policies. However, the web page is still active for this group. To visit our Meetup page go here: <https://www.meetup.com/Elmira-gay-lesbian-bisexual-trans-str8-social-group/>

V. Pastoral Guest Lecturing

In 2020 the Pastor was invited to universities on 6 occasions to present the workshop on sexuality and the Bible and social issues. All of the workshops were presented in the zoom meeting format. This pushed my learning and understanding of online education tools. What I learned using the zoom meeting format was applicable to Skype shortly afterward as Skype updated its platform to use many of the same features. The workshops were presented to students and professionals.

VI. Website and Internet Presence and Technology

In 2020 there was a steady change of content on our website. Several pages were added. We also added links to Facebook Live Video content taken throughout the year. The format of the website was updated with increased links on the submenu found on the left side of each page. This has proven to cause other problems when finding one's way around so there will be improvements in 2021 to continue addressing this problem. There were visitors to the Sunday morning worship events as a result of people reading content on our website. We will continue with many more changes to format and pictures in 2021. The website costs reflected in the 2021 budget lines 38 – 42 are \$1,150.00. All of those monies come from donations and do not come from the Sunday morning offering plate as of

now. Line 2 of the budget is a reflection of our usual offering plate income, \$26,000.00. Line 3 calls for donations to support our General Fund and calls for \$12,169.00. Our website depends on that category of donations so please consider special donations to the website during this year. The website is the modern answer to printing flyers and handing them out as we did in the past. Today we have an Internet presence and it is not without significant costs to maintain. Please be generous and help with this important ministry.

In 2019, you will remember I was able to unlock our access to our Facebook page. Here is a direct link to our Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/lgbtqisia2ssByYou/> It is now possible to search Ray Of Hope Church Elmira NY on Facebook and find us. However, it is not my intention to monitor this page closely at all. It is there for free advertising for our events, and storage for our videos in my opinion. In the year 2020 Kaiden Rae Benedict stepped up and volunteered to monitor, host, and be an Editor of the Facebook page. We are very grateful for this service.

In 2020 there were no new videos added to our YouTube page. To visit our YouTube page go to www.youtube.com/rayofhopenyglbts . Hopefully, more content will be added in the future.

VII. St. Benedict of Nursia Memorial Library

The future of the library is hard to determine at this point. Indeed in 2020 many of the books that are important to the work we do here continued to be uploaded to the Internet in digital format. At some point, the physical space for people gathering will become more important than the preservation of books on our subjects as these resources become available in digital format. The transition is beginning to happen.

VIII. Elmira Building Report

As for the Elmira building all required inspections and tests were brought up to date by the end of 2020. Lisa Frost donated the new fire alarm radio communication control board and its installation. The second phone line was disconnected. It turns out all of our previous fire alarm supervisory, fire trouble, system trouble signals, and false fire alarm signals that rang very frequently were all related to the landline phone line we disconnected. The radio communicator is a significant improvement. Thank you, Lisa. Kaiden added the finish treatments to the front porch and access elevator

decking. Everyone agrees this is a huge improvement to the entrance area. Kaiden also added the safety tape to the steps. Lisa donated the tape. A tarp was purchased by Lisa and we were able to winterize the elevator with it being fully covered.

We purchased a Hoover Power Scrub Elite carpet cleaner system. It paid for itself the second time we used it as compared to renting a power rug cleaner and detergent. This has been used regularly as part of our COVID-19 infection prevention policies. During the year we repaired all of the vacuum cleaners that found their way to this building as we closed the Ithaca, Syracuse locations, and brought all of the equipment to this building. Br. and Kaiden repaired the gutter system and brought it back up to operational status. New locks were installed on the shed and basement doors. Two loads of metal were taken to the scrapyards from the basement. Boxes of papers have been taken to recycle locations. Cleaning and sorting continue and gradually more space is being found.

With each passing year, the condition of the exterior of our building continues to deteriorate. We will certainly have to address some issues in the warmer months of 2021. Watch the Council minutes for details.

IX. Vocational Ministry Training Program

There were no applicants for the VMTP in 2020.

X. Pastoral Search Committee

There has been no response to our call to expand our Pastoral Ministry in 2020.

Volunteers at Ray Of Hope: I just want to recognize the hours and hours of work that go into the ministry of Treasurer, Lisa Frost, and of Moderator, Veronica Floyd in our church. Our Council members are very dedicated to the past, present, and future of Ray Of Hope. Our Council members set the example of service in Membership to the Body Of Christ. The keeping of accurate financial records takes a lot of time and prayers. Often the Treasurer has a very difficult time with the rate of cash flow and the paying of responsibilities promptly. Many thanks to Lisa Frost for giving countless hours to keep our records up to date, accurate, and ready upon request for inspection by anyone. The ministry of Moderator also takes a lot of time and prayers. For the fiscal and theological “sides” of the Congregation to work well together, there must be a very skilled and prayerful Moderator

steering the ship with the pastors. The Moderator often spends time studying the bylaws, reviewing all matters brought through proper channels regarding concerns and questions. The Moderator must be prepared at a moment's notice to oversee and manage any and all concerns that may involve church discipline, and/or church finances.

This is a good time to remind everyone we still need Members to step up to the Council to fill the Vice-Moderator and the Clerk positions. The work and responsibilities of these positions have been spread out to the current Council members and we would appreciate being able to assign them to persons who will specialize in these ministries.

In case you may be interested in these positions here are the job descriptions from our by-laws:

b. Vice-Moderator.

The Vice-Moderator assumes the responsibilities of the Moderator in the Moderator's absence; implements procedures and activities within the Church, its Extensions and extended community as requested by the Moderator; signs as one of the official signatories on Church disbursements; and holds the office of Vice-President of the corporation.

c. Clerk.

The Clerk shall keep a full and complete record of the minutes, correspondence, and all related documentation of the Council; be the officer authorized to receive all petitions, including any to remove any Appointed Pastor or other elected or appointed officer or chairperson and to revoke any license granted for ministry; retain custody of the seal of the corporation and affix it to official papers and instruments as may be required in the regular course of business; prepare all notices and specific correspondence required by the Council; maintain all official records of Church membership, baptisms, and administration of other Rites, and prepare documents reflecting them for the parties involved; prepare the agenda for Council meetings, distribute the agendas to all Council members at least one week prior to each meeting, posting a copy in a prominent

place at the location of the weekly worship service the week before the ensuing Council meeting; and post approved minutes of the Council meetings in a prominent place at the location of the worship service in a timely manner for review of the Members and others in attendance at the service. The Clerk is the official repository of all records of Ray Of Hope Church Of Our Lord Jesus Christ for all preceding calendar years.

<http://www.rayofhopechurch.com/Gov4.htm>

I am sure this is an incomplete assessment of both the Moderator and Treasurer ministries, but time and space govern this. I just wanted to say thank you for your service.

Most people in the public have the impression that churches function with just a pastor. This is not how Ray Of Hope Church functions. We require an involved Membership both in Membership Meetings and in the monthly Council Meetings. We appreciate all who have served on the Council and we thank those who are serving now. At this time we renew our call for more people to become Members of the church and then to serve the church in leadership.

A very special thanks to all who are “seen and unseen” in the ministry of financial support for Ray Of Hope Church. The financial flow of generosity has made it possible for this church to be here “through thick and thin” now for 38 consecutive years of ministry. Just realize this, we are almost to our holy year, the 40th year of ministry. We might want to consider and plan now for some special ministry goals as part of the celebration of our 40th year of ministry. Honestly, we would not be thinking about 40 years of ministry if it was not for the sacrificial giving that goes on every week, every month, every year. Let me just say here, we all want to hug and thank each and every person who gives to this ministry. It was particularly nice to see so many of us in the chapel at the time of Jane’s passing. It was a particular time of thanking one another for the continued support.

So, as we all quarantined and “went home” and “stayed home” during this COVID-19 crisis there is one miracle that happened in front of all of us that we probably did not see. That would be Kaiden living here with me. Let’s try to imagine how different everything would have been here if God had not sent Kaiden seventeen days before my Mother, Jane unexpectedly

passed away, in 2019. I had told Kaiden when we met on September 14 that I expected my mother to live another five or ten years and so I would not be looking for anything beyond a friendship for that time. Well, Mom passed on October 1, as I said, seventeen days later, during Bible Enrichment as I was praying Psalm 91 ("On Eagle's Wings") as the closing prayer. That very night, suddenly all of the healthcare assistants were gone, and I was the only human being here. Michael had just gone home, back to Syracuse Tuesday morning. Michael came back down within a couple of days to help prepare for the funeral, and again I want to say thank you to Michael. Thank you to Cheryl, Christina, Kaiden, and anyone else who stepped up to help that week. The point is how much everything changed "in a heartbeat," something all of us have experienced. World Communion Sunday was five days later, and on that day after worship, Christina met Ian. In late December Kaiden had to leave his former address and came to stay. Christina married Ian on June 21, 2020, and Kaiden and I were there to celebrate the wedding. Pastor Reed presided over the Liturgy of the Word. During the wedding, I presided over The Eucharistic Prayer and gave Ian and Christina their first Communion together.

Oh yes, the theme of this report: we quarantined on March 18, 2020. Suddenly the chapel was closed, suddenly people would not be joining me for Sunday morning worship.

Suddenly, Kaiden and I were "locked-in" for COVID-19 infection prevention. What I am trying to say is, God was watching out for all of us! God knew how all of this was about to shift under our feet, but God had it all planned. Everything you have seen, and the tons of work you have not seen, at the monastery would have been reduced by at least 50% if Kaiden was not here. You see us running around our homemade do it yourself T.V. studio of two on Sunday mornings. Imagine, if I had been here alone. Things would have been dramatically different. So, do join me in thanking Kaiden for jumping in full-hearted, and with an unreserved dedication to this ministry.

Thank you to everyone for staying active and learning how to use your computers, your phones, and devices to increase your participation during 2020. Everyone has had to learn more information on how to use Skype, Zoom, the Internet, and the website. We really appreciate the positive attitude and the personal responsibility everyone has taken to keep up to

speed with all these changes. Like I said above, it is almost like we have been practicing for such a time as this for years. We always knew the future would bring more use of the Internet, we just didn't realize it was all going to happen between March 2020 and now, ten months. Thank you for staying engaged, active, and growing with all these changes.

Finally, as in the last year, I recommend the following Scripture to our Congregation; Colossians 3:16-17 ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. ¹⁷ And whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

We pray together; Lord, hear our prayer.

Please, "do not miss this for the world!"

I am sure I have forgotten important events and may have forgotten to thank persons who should be thanked. Please forgive me and understand it is not intentional. We move on in the love of Christ.

These are some of the positive results of this year of radical change and necessary growth as I am able to remember them.

Respectfully Submitted,
Rev. Br. Shawn F. Benedict, O. S. B.,
Appointed Pastor
1-17-2021