

**Annual Report for Monroe / West Monroe Church Planting  
Harris Bond**

**July 9, 2020**

Fathers and Brothers,

First of all, I want to thank the Presbytery of Mississippi Valley for the generosity of praying, financial support and Gospel partnership. There is Gospel traction, there are hopeful conversions, and there is movement – amid Covid 19 – towards establishing a new work. And this is happening, in large part, through your giving and praying. Thank you also for the many, many kind words and prayers for me in the wake of my heart attack. I have truly felt the love and “recommissioning” of God through many of you.

A year has passed since our family moved to Monroe, Louisiana, to begin the work of Gospel ministry and church planting from scratch. We were in a new state, a new town, with no prior interest group or core group, and with no PCA presence. All we have had is the call & Spirit of God and the belief that the fields are white for harvest and the Spirit is powerful.

**Networking, Befriending, Evangelism | Finding & Building My Parish:**

As we settled into town we began the process of learning our communities, networking and befriending anyone to whom the Lord was leading us, and having people into our home regularly. We have hosted large group, community-creating gatherings in form of neighborhood “happy hours,” or periodic open invite dinners – usually having 30-40 people. Our children have adjusted well in terms of school and friends, for which we’ve been grateful. In all of this, we have been intentional to put ourselves in the way of evangelism and pastoring opportunities. If you pastor and build your broader parish/community, then you will find yourself building and pastoring a new church. Before the pandemic hit, I was meeting an average of 50-60 new faces each month, with meaningful follow up with 15 or so new relationships each month. In addition, I have been given open doors with a local Young Life ministry, and I’ve participating in a mentoring program in my neighborhood’s Neville High School.

**Pre-Covid Encouragement and Momentum:**

In all this, an orbit of friendships and interested people began to be gathered in the Lord’s kindness. Most encouraging is the mixture of folks. One category are unchurched friends who are not believers but are at best “cautiously curious.” This is encouraging and personally reinvigorating. My favorite quote from one unbelieving friend is: “Let me get straight with you, unless it’s ‘God’s will,’ ain’t nobody converting me! But hey, can we talk more about this Gospel?” Another category are believers who go to Mainline Churches. We resonate back and forth as we talk about the Gospel of Jesus. More than once, I’ve heard, “You know this is not what is being preached where I am, and this is what we need.” Or, “This is what I really want to believe!” And a third category are churched evangelical believers, typically in West Monroe.

As we entered into the new year we began to realize that a certain momentum was giving way to a “sweet spot” for gathering people more explicitly. The plan was to kick off a bible study and fellowship gathering, in order to create a more cohesive group, lead with the Word and Spirit, and implicitly cast vision. This start date was the first Sunday in March, with about 30 people committed to coming. The prayer and plan was to have a committed core group in place by the

end of May. The night before our first meeting, the flu hit our home, forcing a postponement to the next week and the need of a germ-free venue. The local Flying Tiger Brewery offered to open just for us on a Sunday evening. I couldn't wait to see what the Lord was going to do! I only had to wait the next day, when the Governor of Louisiana suspended all schools and limited gatherings and stay-at-home orders. In a short stroke, I felt as if all momentum was squelched. This was honestly very discouraging and disorienting.

### **Pandemic Planting, Heart Attack, and Learning to Abide in Christ:**

The quarantine obviously changed dynamics for all of us. Monroe /West Monroe has been a hotspot for Coronavirus cases. How do you network when you can't meet with people or have people into your home? I quickly realized amid the anxieties and depressions that I obviously did not know how to simply rest myself in Jesus or with my family. My busy calendar and performance were where I went for validation and life. Sin exposed. Jesus disclosed. Grace poured into my heart. Thank you, Lord, for this quarantine!

If that was not enough for the Lord to deal seriously yet graciously with my heart, on May 1 I suffered a heart attack and received two stents. I am deeply grateful to the Lord, for confronting me with my fleeting frailty, preserving me from death and sending me back to know & fear Him, to love my family, and to love others with the Gospel "as a dying man to dying men," as long as my heart still beats. Please join me in exalting the name of the Lord and giving thanks to Him.

In this entire process I am profoundly grateful for certain men who have pastored me and spoken into my life. Without these crucial support resources, I cannot imagine doing this type of ministry in a new place. I have tremendously benefitted from the recourses of MNA and my church planting coach (and in many ways my pastor), Alan Foster. Another significant source of both development and reinvigoration is my "evangelism residency" under Al Dayhoff and fellow residents with Evangelize Today Ministries. Richard Wiman has continued to be a dear friend, pastor and mentor and prayer-partner in all this. And lastly, I cannot say enough for the community of planters and the training afforded to me through the Mid-South PCA Church Planting Network and the leadership and coaching of Clint Wilke.

### **Pandemic Planting Going Forward:**

As Louisiana gradually opens up, people are moving around, yet not at the same pre-Covid level. The plan is to go back through the process and rhythm of building and regaining our earlier momentum until we reach that "sweet spot" again. Gathering larger groups is hard under Covid realities; therefore, we double down on relational ministry, more variety in evangelism, and feeling at peace on socially distanced small groups.

We have begun a series of informational / recruitment gatherings in July and August; these have been encouraging! A core group is emerging. I am also building into each week door-to-door evangelism, particularly with a African American church planter on the Southside of Monroe, a predominantly African American community. We are seeking the Lord's direction and are asking Him for the beginnings of a core group in place as we start a Bible Study & fellowship gathering in September. My prayer is that the Lord would indeed bless the ministry of the Word and the relational labors of our emerging group, that we all see a movement of the Holy Spirit, and begin meeting as a Core Group at the end of the fall.