



PASTOR'S UPDATE

THE YEAR BEHIND US (JULY 2021–JUNE 2022)

Dear Liberti friends and family,

One year ago, we were settling into our new home in East Kensington as guests and ministry partners of Urban Worship Center. The location and timing of the move presented three key ministry opportunities, which I shared at our June 2021 congregational meeting: (1) post-pandemic outreach, (2) cross-cultural ministry, and (3) community development.

While continuing our church's normal rhythms of worship, community, and mission, many of you also served in these new ministry areas. Below are some examples, in case you didn't hear about them all.

1. POST-PANDEMIC OUTREACH

While we are by no means in a "post-COVID" world, and we still need to be mindful of those who are most vulnerable to this virus, the world has certainly opened up. We've seen adults come to faith for the first time through campus outreach and day-to-day "Gospel presence" on our blocks. Just this week, two neighbors on Cumberland Street attended our Monday morning prayer gathering. They both happened to be senior citizens. It's difficult to imagine this happening one year ago when I met them while going door to door to introduce myself as one of the new pastors on the block. Larry Walker, our Outreach Director, facilitated most of these **door-to-door** greetings, but more of his outreach focused on **local college campuses** during the 2021-22 academic year.

After years of closures and disappointments, Philly's campus ministries really hit a stride last fall! Many of you helped college students get to church, and many others spoke on campus and hosted students for meals. There has been much fruit—we've seen college students come to faith in Christ, **eight short-term summer interns** are serving with our church from late May through mid-June, and three more students are part of a full summer immersion program through August. Special thanks to the college ministers at our church who have endured three chaotic academic years—Hannah Gajari and Liz Spiegler, amongst others. Great job, ladies.

Beginning this past winter, many of you also participated in "**Youth Basketball Fridays**," a monthly partnership between Liberti, UWC, and Kensington Health Sciences High School.

With two churches and two high schools all within one block, many of you prayed for fruitful partnerships to emerge to bless our city's youth. It is

happening. Many dozens (hundreds?) of youth have come through these Friday events, and Phil Stoltzfus is helping to organize for the fall.

And, of course, there's more. The often-unsung efforts of Julie Cantu and the Rosario and Hicks families in "Homework Club" have been a lifeline to children and teens every week. (Forgive me for leaving out names—I know there are others!)

2. CROSS-CULTURAL MINISTRY

Our new church home is only a half-mile walk from our old location in Fishtown, but it is a different community in many respects. There is greater ethnic and class diversity within a ten-block radius and a different sense of community and shared history. Of course, this involves different ministry needs and opportunities among our immediate neighbors.

Much of our education in cross-cultural ministry has come through our ministry partners and hosts at Urban Worship Center, who have served the greater Kensington area for many decades. Side-by-side with UWC members and leaders, we watched how they do it. What did we learn? Well, UWC members celebrate a lot. I mean a lot.

You've read above about our joint partnership with "Youth Basketball Fridays." Liberti also supported UWC's annual **Vacation Bible School** last August, which over 50 kids attended. It was loud, fast-paced, hilarious, and heartwarming. Sometimes we at Liberti have downplayed big, high-energy outreach events organized to gather neighbors together—we tend to emphasize ongoing, week-to-week rhythms of worship, community, and mission. But big events have their place, clearly. UWC engages area families very well through this outreach, and VBS is happening again this August, with a Cumberland Street block party to cap the event. Stay tuned!

Many of you have stayed after our service on Sunday morning to worship with UWC at 11:30 am. We combined our services twice, on **Christmas Eve and Good Friday**, and Pastor Jose and I threw in an old-fashioned "pulpit swap" for good measure, which we plan to do again this year. We also **shared leadership development events** — our own on the topic of homosexuality and another city-wide gathering called Movement Day, hosted by the Philadelphia Gospel Movement.

Finally, we've also been significantly influenced by the [Institute for Cross Cultural Mission](#). Several members of our [Beautiful Community Team](#) attended their annual conference this past year in Washington, DC, which ended up being their last. Sadly, ICCM has decided to close, but the BCT has continued to lead our congregations in discussions about cross-cultural mission, and plans to engage more with the [Philadelphia Gospel Movement](#) this year in its mission to unite diverse churches in the mission of the kingdom.

3. COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

During the height of the pandemic, our deacons and staff co-founded a local **food pantry** with—you guessed it—Urban Worship Center! UWC is home to your friendly neighborhood chapter of the food-relief organization [Small Things](#), packing and delivering meals every first and third weekend of the month (contact lcmvolunteers@liberti.org—we need your help!). Also, during the pandemic, we fundraised \$15,000 toward constructing a low-cost home in partnership with local non-profit “Simple Homes,” stirring our congregation to be more involved with the growing housing crisis in our region.

Our deacons, elders, and staff quickly realized two things. First, we knew we wanted to continue this community development work, particularly as we moved into East Kensington. Secondly, we knew it was too much work for the church officers and staff to oversee, in addition to their other responsibilities. These things led to establishing a new non-profit: **Liberti Community Ministries (LCM)**. Through the hard work of Michael Black and several other key volunteers, LCM now has a board and is finalizing the bylaws during Summer 2022! In the immediate future, LCM's work will likely focus on housing and mentoring through internships. We will share more at our congregational meeting on Thursday, 6/16.

Finally, we rejoiced to partner this year with a new organization called [Compound Impact](#), an organization founded by outgoing members Kealan and Alison Hobelmann (we'll miss you!). Compound Impact is a **refugee housing organization** that ministers at the intersection of all three of our current strategic foci — outreach, cross-cultural ministry, and community development. **Last fall, we helped an Afghan family settle into the first-ever CI home in Northeast Philadelphia.** This past April, several dozen church members got to meet the family over a meal, hear their story, and celebrate their arrival and safe settlement.

THE YEAR AHEAD (JULY 2021–JUNE 2022)

Throughout the year ahead, our strategic ministry foci will remain the same. “Outreach” will be the focus of a late-summer sermon series and our Fall Leadership Retreat (September 16–17). Several book studies oriented toward those investigating Christianity are planned as well. We pray this will fuel our outreaches to our blocks and campuses.

In terms of cross-cultural ministry, our partnership with Urban Worship Center continues, and our Beautiful Community Team has a strong line item in our proposed 2022–23 budget to lead us in studying and practicing hospitality toward all the neighbors in our region, beginning with engagement with the updated vision and work of **Philadelphia Gospel Movement**.

And in terms of Community Development, in addition to the formal launch of Liberti Community Ministries later this year, we anticipate the fall revival of “Urban Youth Extreme,” the UWC-founded tutoring ministry we co-funded with our 2021 Advent Drive. We need volunteers! Please get in touch with larry@liberti.org if you are interested.

JOHN IN JULY

Finally, a word about me: in early May, the elders asked me to consider taking off the entire month of July for an extended time of rest, given some of the unique ministry challenges of the past two and a half years. It is a kind and generous offer, and I am glad to accept it. You will all be in the capable care of our elders, deacons, staff, and other ministry leaders—including the newly ordained Stephen Wood! Woo Hoo!

I plan to hit the ground running again on 8/1 after that time.

God bless and guard you all!

Rev. John Alexander

LIBERTI COMMUNION UPDATE

Covenant Church of Doylestown, a church in our region and a friend of the Liberti Communion of Churches, has been without a lead pastor for almost two years. After months of dialogue with Covenant Church and its leadership, Steve Huber has agreed to serve as its lead pastor. Steve will continue to serve as the Director of the Liberti Communion of Churches but will delegate some aspects of his role to other leaders.

Steve's role at Covenant Church has opened the possibility for the church to join the Liberti Communion. Covenant has committed to take significant steps to explore that partnership, including sending their ministry leaders and pastors to Liberti pastor cohorts and leadership gatherings next year. Covenant has also committed to contributing financially next year and has graciously agreed to host the communion's Saturday Liberti Leadership gathering in February 2023.

Please pray for Steve Huber and his family during this transition and his time shepherding Covenant Church. If you have questions about Steve's new role or the Liberti Communion of Churches, contact John Alexander at john@liberti.org.

LIBERTI COMMUNITY MINISTRIES

JAY BARBIERI & MICHAEL BLACK

We have a provisional board of directors leading Liberti Community Ministries. Our board consists of Jay Barbieri, Debbie Barbieri, Renee Horst, Phil Stoltzfus, Gabe Li, Larry Walker, Anne Marie McDowell, and Mike Cedeno. Our staff and board are currently working on the ministry service footprint, Mission & Vision statements, and structure for serving those in our communities.

The bylaws have been updated and are in final review. The hard work is now before us. Please take a moment and pray for our board that Jesus would bless the work of our hands and give us wisdom in serving our neighbors as the very presence of Christ for the River Wards.

FOOD PANTRY

MICHAEL BLACK

Our food pantry has consistently served approximately 120 families in and surrounding the River Wards of Philadelphia. We've been working on defining a service area for our food pantry to offer more consistent support for those we serve. We are always looking for more food packers on Fridays and drivers on Saturday mornings. If you would like to learn more about ways to help in our food pantry or if you know someone in need of food, contact Michael Black at michael@liberti.org.



SUMMER INTERNS & COLLEGE VOLUNTEERS

LARRY WALKER

This last school year has been a fruitful year of tending to and cultivating relationships with college students and staff on various campuses, primarily through Cru at Temple. These efforts have culminated in a revival of a 10-year-old Summer Program called Mission Liberti. We are excited to welcome eight college students and six staff members for Mission Liberti this year. For three weeks, these students and staff get a glimpse of what life and ministry are like in Philadelphia.

We are also blessed by having three of our regular attending college students, one of whom is a member of our Church, join us for an informal College-age summer enrichment program. During this program, the students will focus on growing as disciples of Jesus together and serving our city. All of this, Lord willing, is leading to greater engagement with and revitalizing of our College ministry as we look to the next academic year. Join us in praying for and getting to know college students visiting Liberti. If you have any interest or vision in this vital and exciting area of ministry, please reach out to Larry at larry@liberti.org.

BEAUTIFUL COMMUNITY TEAM

MIKE KWON & JULIAN SPIEGLER

The Beautiful Community team meets quarterly to discuss how we can practice the ministry of reconciliation here at Liberti as we gather as a body of believers from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicities. At our last meeting, we debriefed our previous event held in March (the book discussion of Reading While Black) and looked forward to planning and budgeting for future events and yearly rhythms. Team members also attended a similarly focused gathering at the presbytery level in May, where we met with a family of other churches in our denomination and learned from each other. We are encouraged by the work God is doing in our presbytery and especially look forward to building on the relationships we have formed with other churches who are also thinking through the topic of reconciliation.

LIBERTI KID'S CLUB

STEPHEN WOOD

We just wrapped up another great year with Liberti Kids! Our two main ministries for our kids this year were Liberti Kids Club and our catechism class. Liberti Kids Club is our church's mid-week gathering for kids between K and 3rd grade. By God's grace, we met nearly every week this year! Throughout fall, winter, and spring, we taught the kids about the early church in Acts, the life of David, and the book of Judges. We also had tons of fun playing games! Our catechism class was the biggest change to our kid's ministry this past year. Throughout the year, eight kids from our church (roughly grades 4–6) learned about the basics of our theology. Topics included the importance of the Bible, creation, covenant, the ten commandments, Jesus' divinity and humanity, the sacraments, and more. The kids implemented practices of the faith—they memorized Scripture, served at our services, and had meals with other members of the church. On June 5th, we received them as in-covenant members at Liberti. There is so much to thank God for from this past year! Thank you to all you parents who served, showed up, and offered feedback; our kids ministry couldn't happen with you.

INTERNATIONAL MISSIONS TEAM

LIZ SPIEGLER

The International Missions team meets monthly to pray for missionaries that Liberti Church of the River Wards supports and to explore mission opportunities in our city. Liberti Church of the River Wards recently sent Paul Cary as a missionary to Romania through Mission to the World. The team is currently discussing ways to connect and minister to the family from Afghanistan introduced to us through Compound Impact. With the formation of the Liberti Communion International Partnership Team, Liberti Church of the River Wards' International Mission team will soon set its sights on examining ways to join with other Liberti churches in our efforts for missions. Contact Liz Spiegler at elizabeth.spiegler@intervarsity.org with any questions about the International Missions Team or to find ways to help support its efforts.

WOMEN'S MINISTRY TEAM

CAROL DAVIS & BOBBI WENGER

The highlight for this year was the Women's Retreat that took place from May 20–22 at Harvey Cedars Bible Conference on Long Beach Island. The women enjoyed a good time of fellowship, worship, and teaching. The speaker encouraged the women to see that suffering is a normal part of the Christian life as they experience their union with Christ through their suffering. In their suffering, they die with Christ and rise with Him as he brings their resurrection. Death does not have the final word. Other Women's Ministry events included a book study of Gentle and Lowly and a contemplative walk on the Wissahickon trail. The women's sexual purity group continues to meet and is open to new members. The team plans to continue its book study of Gentle and Lowly over the summer. The women at Liberti seek to grow through building relationships of accountability and discipleship. Feel free to reach out to Carol Davis at carolclair219@gmail.com with needs or ideas for ways to build our community.

YOUTH RECREATION NIGHTS

PHIL STOLTZFUS

I want to take the opportunity to say "Thanks!" to all those who showed up these past few months to our Youth Recreation Nights. There has been lots of positivity all around for these events. As we look ahead to the fall, volunteers for Youth Recreation Nights are thinking of ways we can further develop relationships with Urban Worship Center, Kensington Health Sciences Academy, and youth in the surrounding neighborhoods. So far, the youths attending these nights include UWC youth and students from Kensington Sciences Academy. We are hoping to brainstorm more ideas to engage with the neighborhood. I am glad to be involved with this with all of you and am thankful we have so many volunteers willing to generously and enthusiastically give their time and hearts to these kids! If you would like to connect to share thoughts and ideas for this ministry, email phillipstoltzfus@yahoo.com.

