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“State of the Church” 3 October 2021

- Good morning church family, we are so glad that you have joined with us today and we trust that you have been made aware of the presence of God with you, right where you are.
- As we said last week, today’s sermon is going to be a bit different, and the reason this sermon is a bit different is that it’s not a sermon at all, but a report from your pastors on the state of the church—and we will be reporting to you not only about where we are as a church, but also about where we have been and where we are going together as the body of Christ in 2021.
- And it makes sense to give you this report at this time, since the church’s business year ends in September, and so as we are entering a new business year, and as we will soon be entering Advent and a new liturgical year, it is good to take some time to look around, to look back and to envision what may be ahead of us as we live out our focus on Hospitality, Health and Holiness.
- And so we begin by asking “where have we been”—where have we been and what have we done for the last couple of years?
- And so let’s back up to the beginning of the year 2020. Way back when we were first beginning to hear that now familiar term, COVID, and we were

learning to use hand sanitizer and greet people with our elbows instead of a handshake—nobody had really given much thought to facemasks yet—but they were coming.

- The church leadership had met in January 2020 to examine and consider all the activities and resources that we had as a church, and to pray and plan how we could best meet the needs of our community—and to try to more clearly understand what those needs were as well. And out of a full day of working on that came our 2020 vision statement—it's there in your listening guide, in its updated form, and it focuses on hospitality, health, and holiness—those 3 components that we've spent the last 5 weeks unpacking in our sermons. Back in 2020 we had a lot of plans associated with our vision statement—we were going to start an evening gathering called Second Helping, and we were going to start holding monthly "Lunch and Learn" gatherings—in fact, we had the first of those in February, but on Sunday morning, March 15, 2020, we all gathered for church, and the sermon was the last sermon in the Hospitality, Health and Holiness series—and none of us knew it at the time, but just a couple of days later we found out that we were going into lockdown—and we would not meet again for worship on a Sunday morning for more than 500 days. Our plans suddenly changed—what we thought would be happening—lunch and learns, Second Helping—even Sunday morning worship—was not happening for the foreseeable future,— Now, we did not see that coming, but we adapted, just like everyone else did—one of the strengths of our church is that we are flexible and

- adaptable—and we didn't have any other choice anyway—but regardless of the situation, the church was still called to be the church, to build the Kingdom, to edify the body, to proclaim the gospel—and if the Apostle Paul could do God's will while locked up in a prison cell, we could certainly do it while locked down in a pandemic, and so we learned about this thing called Zoom—and we had our board meetings and our prayer meetings and our Bible studies, Big Faith and then Second Helping, on Zoom—it was not the same as being in the same room, but it was definitely better than nothing
- And instead of meeting for worship, we expanded the audio sermons that were on our website into full services, with music and scripture and invocations and benedictions—in time, as we learned more and more about how to produce an online service, those services would become video services, as they are now-- And we also had the opportunity this past December to put together a pretty spectacular Christmas Eve Special video—if you haven't seen it you should definitely check it out on YouTube,
 - but over those months we saw our online audience grow and heard reports of folks who were hearing the gospel for the first time, and of folks who had previously had no interest in church or worship services or hearing about Jesus, who were joining us for worship online each week, and we knew that God was working in the lives of people not only in this community, but all over the world—and that the Holy Spirit is working and speaking to folks through technology that we would not have developed or utilized if the

pandemic had not happened—that is, the Kingdom was being built not in spite of our situation, but as a result of it.

- Even though we were not meeting in person in our church building, people were being fed spiritually by the Largs Church of the Nazarene. But it wasn't just spiritually that people were being fed by LargsNaz during lockdown—our hospitality ministry would see that they were fed physically, too—and it's nothing short of miraculous the opportunities that God has opened up for our church.
- After our abundant Christmas Dinner in 2019, volunteers packed up 20 or so hearty meals and put them in the freezer. We reached out to the Largs Foodbank and they were overjoyed to be able to share those meals with the people they serve. In March, when lockdown occurred, we again reached out to the Foodbank and offered to cook weekly meals that could then be added to the weekly parcels that went out to families and individuals in our community.
- Since March of 2020, we have continued to cook meals for distribution at the Foodbank each week and since then have partnered with individuals, churches, the North Ayrshire Council and the Resilience team to provide hope and joy through hearty meals and delicious sweet biscuits, cakes and puddings from the LargsNaz kitchen and the kitchens of our LargsNaz bakers.
- During Christmas and New Years Eve of 2020, with the help of volunteers, we prepared 250 holiday meals – with all the trimmings. These meals were

delivered to not only our weekly groups but also to those working at the Ambulance station over the holidays.

- Along with the meals being prepared weekly, we have a group of dedicated home bakers (some of whom attend Largs Naz and others who don't) who are preparing sweet treats and fresh bread. This has been ongoing since the beginning of lockdown. We have been blessed to work with Margaret Barclay, Jane Seymour, Janis Wilson and Moira Turner who, over the past 18 months have made thousands of sweet treats for the hospitality ministry and who continue to help in so many ways.
- In addition to the monetary donations received over the year, we have received generous food donations from the Paddle Steamer restaurant, Morrison's, the Largs Food Bank and a locally owned shop just around the corner called Minimal Footprint. We've also received donations from local gardens – apples, rhubarb, runner beans, carrots – locally grown, organic produce that has helped us bless others in a very practical – and delicious – way. All food donations have been either used immediately or preserved for later use. These food donations have not only reduced our food costs, but they have enabled us to develop relationships with folks in our community that wouldn't necessarily have been formed otherwise.
- By the end of 2021, we will have prepared and delivered – to folks in our community, over 5000 meals and on the label of each one of those meals and biscuits and cakes and puddings is our church information, website and an invitation to join us for worship. And we are certain that many of the folks

who join our online service each week found out about it from a label on a LargsNaz meal.

- 5000 meals over the last year, and another 5000 expected in the year to come—it's hard to imagine that we would have the resources to accomplish such a thing, but the Bible as well as our experience tells us that for just a few followers of Jesus, feeding 5000 is not at all impossible, in fact we can expect to do that and have basketsful leftover.
- And so that is a little bit of where we have been over the past 18 months or so, but where are we now? To begin to answer that, let's back up just a little bit.
- You'll probably remember back a few months ago, around April and May—we began to hear that we were moving out of lockdown—from Level 3 to level 2 and Level 1 and then finally to Level 0—and when all that happened, the LargsNaz leadership began to very carefully consider re-opening our building and gathering together—we had discussed this throughout the pandemic, and we took it very seriously, because even though we all very desperately wanted to meet and worship and fellowship, we also wanted to protect each other—but as more and more of our people were getting vaccinated, we began to discuss more urgently the possibility of gathering—first in our prayer meeting, and then for our Bible study—but when it came to gathering for worship on a Sunday morning, the size of our building proved to be a real obstacle, because under the guidelines as they stood back in April or May or thereabouts, we were allowed to meet for a “worship

service,” but because of social distancing we could only allow about a dozen people into the building, and we couldn’t sing, and we all had to wear facemasks, so it was one of those situations where we COULD meet as a church, but it wasn’t going to be easy, and it wasn’t going to be particularly pleasant either.

- But during one of our discussions, somebody—I think it was Pastor Tasha, pointed out that people were meeting in pubs and restaurants under very different regulations than those that applied to places of worship, and so we thought, well, our building is a certified and inspected hospitality venue—it has been for years—maybe we ought to find out what the guidelines would be for us if we wanted to use our building as a café—as a hospitality venue—maybe we could do that on Sundays? And so we decided that we’d go online and brave the complicated web of guidelines and regulations and see what might be possible. We weren’t looing forward to that, but it needed to be done.
- But do you know we never got the chance to do that? The very NEXT DAY a letter arrived in the post at the church—it was a thick letter, pages and pages long—and do you know what it said?
- It said: Largs Church of the Nazarene, you are a recognized hospitality venue, and as a hospitality venue, THESE are the guidelines you must follow. And there they were. In detail. All that we needed to do to function as the LargsNaz Café—and from there it all fell into place—well, it fell into place with a whole lot of hard work from a lot of very talented and generous

people--we'd open for brunch, and we'd watch the online service just like they watch the football at the pubs all around us—and we would follow the guidelines to the letter—and that is how the LargsNaz Sunday Brunch came to be—and people came, and they kept coming, and they enjoyed it, and they helped out, and they continue to do so

- And so we began a sermon series called Food for Thought that coincided with the opening of the Café for Brunch, and then we decorated the place for Psalm Beach and everybody had a great time with that—we wore our flowers and our Hawaiian shirts and we all had a wonderful time of fellowship together
- And then as the guidelines began to allow, we added a separate worship service that meets before the brunch, and we pray and sing and worship together—wearing facemasks for the time being, but we're hearing great feedback from folks who are so happy to be able to worship again, and we certainly appreciate the talents and dedication of Rick and Janis during our worship service-- and LargsNaz is growing—we welcomed 4 new members in September and we will welcome more soon—God is working through our church and the gospel is being proclaimed in new and creative ways that we would never have imagined had we not been through this strange and trying time during this pandemic.
- And of course everything we do in our building is made easier and more comfortable by the recent updates to our facilities—thanks to generous donors our kitchen has a new hob and tap, and an amazing soap dispenser,

not to mention other equipment and of course thank you to everyone who donated toward the boiler fund. Our new boiler was fitted and it is running brilliantly! We'd also like to thank Allan Seymour and Rick Wilson for boxing in the pipes. It not only functions great, but it looks great as well.

- All of this helps out when we meet not only on Sunday morning but also for Second Helping and for our prayer meetings on Wednesdays.
- And so that is where we are—but where are we going?
- Well starting next Sunday, we'll begin a new sermon series called Meet the Gospels—this will run for 4 Sundays, and we'll be learning about Mark, Matthew, Luke and John—and not just the writers of the gospels, but about the gospels themselves—we'll learn what makes each of them unique—when and how they were written and how each of them adds to the richness of the story of Jesus' life and ministry—you'll never look at the gospels in the same way again, and we are very excited about sharing this series with you. Now the "Meet the Gospels" series will take us to the end of October, and we'll have a Second Helping Bible study on the 31st of October—that's Halloween of course—but then in November things will change a bit, because
- During the month of November, your pastors are going to visit family in the States and in order to ease the burdens on our volunteers, rather than having a full brunch menu, we'll be offering coffee, tea and sweet treats from our LargsNaz bakers. Besides, the food, there won't be a change in the format at all. We'll still gather together for worship and then afterward we'll watch the online service together whilst enjoying delicious treats and beverages. There

won't be a charge for the treats, but we will have envelopes available if you would like to continue to support the ministries of LargsNaz.

- Now in the online service in November, we'll still be making an appearance, but the sermon each week will be brought to you by a special guest speaker—and we are very pleased to let you know that November's speakers will be our District Superintendent Rev. Ruth Turner, our previous district superintendent Rev Claire Fender, and our good friends Rev Tommy Goodwin and Rev Jacob Morris. We are looking forward to hearing what they have to share with us and we know that you won't want to miss it either.
- Now because we'll have special speakers during the month of November, we're going to move communion from the first Sunday of November to the last Sunday of October.
- Now just a couple of updates to our building that will be happening soon—first, some time ago we had a fundraiser to raise money for the Fridge/freezer fund—that was to purchase a new freezer and a new commercial fridge as well as some cabinetry—and we appreciate so much everyone who donated to that fund—we have purchased the freezer, which is downstairs in the church, and we have designed the area with the cabinets and fridge, and that will be installed after Christmas—so watch for that development. Another development you may notice is that we removed the sign that was on the outside of the church building. The information on that sign had been incorrect for quite some time and the church board decided to remove it until we are able to re-design the sign with correct info. We're in

the process of doing that now and will have a new sign in the next couple of months.

- Now, we want to tell you about a really exciting event that LargsNaz is going to be hosting in the community. In the past, we've held Christmas dinners in our sanctuary, but over the past 18 months, God has opened doors that have allowed LargsNaz to share the love of Jesus with the community in ways we couldn't have possibly imagined so this year, we will be hosting a Christmas Day meal for the entire community of Largs. Of course it would be impossible to host a community meal of this scale in the LargsNaz sanctuary but thankfully St John's has offered the use of their hall and all of the churches in Largs Churches Together have offered to help. We've begun our planning meetings and will need loads of volunteers - folks who would like to cook, serve, donate money and food, roll silverware, make people feel welcome and loved - there's lots to do and lots of places for you to serve and be the hands and feet and face of Jesus to our neighbours here in Largs.
- We are also excited to announce that we will be re-starting our monthly Lunch and Learn gatherings in January 2022 - we'll have a brand new schedule - with some really fun and interesting topics - and we'll be publishing that schedule in the December newsletter.
- Of course our men's breakfast will continue to meet on Tuesdays, and we appreciate so much those times of fellowship and encouragement—and good food

- We want to take this opportunity to thank you for supporting the church and all that we do. All the ministries of the church here at LargsNaz—salaries and expenses and utilities—all of that is financed through your regular giving—through donations and offerings and the tithes of individuals just like you. The past 18 months or so have made it difficult for churches to keep paying their bills, and we certainly pray for those churches that are struggling because of the pandemic. We conducted a financial review with the church board recently and we found that when we look at our expenses versus our income over the past two years, on average, our church has been in a deficit of about £67 each month—and that’s not terrible, but it’s not sustainable because that means we’re drawing on our reserves that we have saved for emergencies—but we know that God is faithful, and His people are faithful, and as we move out of this time of restriction we are sure that we will see our financial situation improve and that we’ll be able to fund all the things that LargsNaz does and all that God is calling us to do. Some folks have pledged to increase their support in order to cover that £67 pounds, and we certainly appreciate that. If you’re not doing so already, the simplest way to support LargsNaz is to set up a bank transfer, a standing order. Our bank details are here on the screen: Acct:00127871 Sort code: 80-17-11. You can also give a one-time or recurring gift online by using our "Tithely" form at LargsNaz.org on the giving page. For donations specifically to the Hospitality Ministry, please mark your donation “Hospitality.” Donations and offerings may also be placed in the white lockbox at the rear of the sanctuary. You

giving supports not only the work of the church here in Largs but also the work of missionaries all across the globe, and makes possible the advancement of the gospel and the building of the Kingdom, and God will bless you as you are faithful. Of course giving financially is only one of the ways that you can be a part of the work of the church—we need your prayers and your time and your talents and your energy and enthusiasm, and we appreciate all the ways that you all volunteer and encourage and take part in the life of LargsNaz.

- As we have thought about the state of the church—where we have been and where we are going, one verse of scripture has been on my mind—it’s just a short verse from Proverbs, chapter 16 verse 9, that tells us: The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps. And the last 18 months or so have been a powerful reminder that while we are called to make plans—to use our minds and our talents and to be led by the Spirit to chart a course not just for our own lives but also for the church itself—while we are called to make a plan, our faith also requires that we acknowledge the ways that God will direct our steps—the ways that God’s ever-surprising grace and transforming creativity will bring about those things that are beyond what we could plan, beyond what we could dream of, beyond what we could even ask for or imagine. I’m excited to see where God takes us in the months and years to come—we’re excited to see the ways that God uses Largs Church of the Nazarene to do His will and to change lives for Jesus—all the opportunities that we will be given to be the body of Christ.

- And one of the clearest ways that the church practices being the body of Christ is when we celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion together, when we gather at the table and remember what Jesus life and death and resurrection mean to us. Pastor Tasha is going to lead us in just a moment, but first we're going to take a few moments to prepare the elements, and to prepare ourselves. Take the next couple of minutes to gather the wine and the bread, and to still your heart and mind, and then we'll partake together.