**Life is Calling, Samford University  
2020 Annual Meeting Pre-Work**

Life is Calling began a YouTube series called *What’s Working Wednesday* in early August as a way for churches to hear from one another about how their congregations had adapted to a new way of being in the pandemic without another whole-iHub Zoom meeting to add to the calendar.

One church was interviewed each week, and each pastor or leader shared their answers to four questions:

* What’s working well?
* What’s making it work so well?
* What’s your biggest challenge?
* What keeps you hopeful?

Of the interviews we conducted, two stood out as stories of innovation, creativity, and promise. Below you’ll find a re-cap of these interviews, along with a link to see the complete video.

**Rev. Dr. Geraldine Daniels, Pastor, Southside CME Church, Birmingham, Alabama**

Rev. Dr. Daniels tells the story of how her congregation went from “just sitting next to each other in the pews to working together” to serve the local community during 2020. Southside CME went through a process of discernment in 2019 which led them to think creatively about how to aid students who were coming to Sunday school at church but were not reading at grade-level. Some church members are also teachers at a local elementary school, which opened the door for conversation with the church about providing reading intervention programs after school and during the summer. Southside’s new ministry, called S.H.I.E.L.D. (Student Helpers in Literacy Development), was put on hold when Alabama’s stay-at-home order went into effect in March. However, the congregation found creative ways to serve the community, among which included a weekly drive-through food box distribution in their parking lot in cooperation with a local food bank. This is where Dr. Daniels really saw her congregation come together to carry on the work of the church even though they were not able to meet in their sanctuary for weekly worship.

The congregation experienced grief, too. It came with the loss of worship, like so many other churches, the loss of personal contact, and especially with the loss of loved ones. One of the biggest challenges Dr. Daniels faced in this year was how to minister to members whose loved ones died since they were not able to celebrate the life of the loved one in familiar ways. One church member, a woman in her early 30’s, died of Covid-19. This was a “daughter of the church,” raised at Southside CME, and the loss was felt congregation-wide.

Dr. Daniels also expressed that the agility she has seen in her congregation keeps her hopeful for the future – not just of Southside, but of the Church. She commented that her members resolved not to sit and wait, but to find ways to worship and gather safely, continue working in the community feeding neighbors and registering them to vote, and to keep “being the church.”

A longer interview with Rev. Dr. Daniels can be seen on the CCR YouTube channel [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYmIyjxfixA&t=441s).

**Rev. Elizabeth O’Neill, Pastor, Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Montgomery, AL**

Rev. O’Neill sensed early in 2020 that her congregation was experiencing some collective burn-out. Because they are a commuter church, Sundays were becoming marathons of worship, fellowship, Sunday school, shared meals, and committee meetings, making a lot of involved church members weary. Rev. O’Neill began to pray about how the church could step back and engage in Sabbath practices, and then the pandemic shut everything down.

As Rev. O’Neill pondered ways for her congregation to stay connected in the shutdown, she had the idea of a rope labyrinth on the lawn of the church for parishioners to come and walk outside, giving them a sacred practice and a chance to see each other (distanced and masked) in a familiar place. The rope labyrinth turned into an idea for a more permanent installation, and as the call for justice intensified nationwide after George Floyd’s death, it gave church members who did not feel comfortable (for health reasons) attending a public protest a place to come and pray and gather. The church continues to work on the labyrinth and the surrounding space, making it a place for prayer, small gatherings, and including some art, which is important to the congregation.

Rev. O’Neill has commented that their congregation has found that a lot of the “usual” church programming is not life-giving, and in some ways has failed to provide us with the disciplines and practices that sustain us in times of crisis (including pandemics). Her congregation remains hopeful that rethinking their own programming will see them get “back to basics” and focus their worship and ministries on the things that are most life-giving and best form them spiritually into the future.

A longer interview with Rev. O’Neill can be seen on the CCR YouTube channel [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7vVYI_Bv4mQ).