

--- A Holistic --- **MISSION GUIDE**

*The Church's Response
in Times of Crisis*



**BAPTIST
WORLD
ALLIANCE**

*Global
Ministry
Resource*

A Holistic Mission Guide: The Church's Response in Times of Crisis

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The Baptist World Alliance, founded in 1905, is a fellowship of 241 conventions and unions in 126 countries and territories comprising 49 million baptized believers in 174,000 churches. For more than 100 years, the Baptist World Alliance has networked the Baptist family to impact the world for Christ with a commitment to strengthen worship, fellowship and unity; lead in mission and evangelism; respond to people in need through aid, relief, and community development; defend religious freedom, human rights, and justice; and advance theological reflection and leadership development.

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CONTENTS

Letter from the General Secretary

Foreword

Acknowledgements

Theological Reflections

A Future for Church?.....	1
A Time for Redeeming Human Sanity.....	4
After the Pandemic: Where Do We Go from Here?.....	8
Are You Curious?.....	12
Back to Normal?.....	15
A Christian-Buddhist Dialogue on Suffering.....	19
Evangelism, Discipleship, and Integral Mission in the Time of COVID-19.....	24
Faith in the Time of COVID-19: Why Should We Respond?.....	29
God Is Not in Crisis.....	35
Justice and Compassion: Mission in Post-COVID Society.....	38
Misery, Messages of Hope, and Miracles.....	43
Paradigm Shift: Thinking about the Future of the Church in a Post-Pandemic World.....	47
Reimagining Ritual: Compassion During a Time of Crisis.....	51
Theology in Times of Crisis.....	54
The Church's Response to the World in the New Normal.....	59
The Great Omission.....	64
The Power of Last Words.....	69
The Priesthood of All Believers.....	73
Theology of Discipleship: Jesus's Discipleship Model of Suffering and Sacrifice.....	79
Three Groanings.....	83
Unstoppable: COVID-19 and the Church.....	87
Zoom Ecclesiology: The Church Scattered and Gathered.....	90

Grassroots Stories

A Church Response to the COVID-19 Crisis: The Case of the Baptist Church in Central Africa.....	94
A Radical Change Toward a Full Conversion.....	99
A Reflection on the Church Response to the Pandemic Crisis from a Naga Context.....	102



CONTENTS

A Society's Outpouring of Kindness.....	106
An Emergency Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic.....	111
Be the Church Outside the Temple.....	116
Care Project Connects Church to Community	122
Discovering Joy in Burma.....	126
Equipping Youth and Children to Be Worshippers.....	131
Finding Hope in a Pandemic.....	134
From Relapse to Hope.....	138
I Was Hungry and You Fed Me.....	142
Initiatives in the Church Amidst the Current Situation in Japan.....	147
Light in the Dark, Tiny Room.....	150
Rethinking What It Means to “Gather” the Congregation.....	153
Teaching Children to Persevere During the Pandemic.....	158
The Church and the Response to Crisis: Working with Migrants.....	160
The Church Is Sharing Our Burden: The Response of the Lebanese Baptist Church to Syrian Refugees.....	165
The Impact of COVID-19 on Churches in Nigeria.....	169
The Mission of the Church.....	173
The Mission of the Church: Evangelism and Discipleship.....	177
The Strategic Place of the Local Church in Global Relief.....	179
Under Military Coup: The Church’s Struggle, Spiritual Formation, and Social Work in Myanmar.....	183
Victorian Baptist Churches on a Mission for Innovation.....	188

Practical Guidelines

APBAid Response Framework and Resource Toolkit.....	193
Church and Crisis Response: A Story of Victory and Adaptation to the New Reality.....	198
Church Budget Planning in a Pandemic.....	204
Creating Meaningful Engagement and Connection in Online Worship.....	208
Creativity in Lockdown.....	212
Freedom of Religion or Belief and COVID-19: What Makes for a Legitimate Limitation?.....	217
Leading the Church Beyond the Pandemic.....	223
Pandemic-Born Creativity.....	228
The Daily Office in a Contemporary Setting.....	231
United in Christ: The Power of Praying Together.....	236



A Holistic MISSION GUIDE

The Church's Response in Times of Crisis

From the beginning, God has been reaching into the world to inaugurate the Kingdom of God. Genesis through Revelation reverberate with God's love for all people in all places, inviting us to participate in what God is doing to make known his heart and kingdom. As South African theologian David Bosch challenges in *Transforming Mission*, God is the source for mission and, as he is always active in the world, invites the church to participate in the mission of God through holistic engagement and suffering. As has been observed, missions refers to the people of God participating in the purposes of God for the inauguration of the Kingdom of God.

This passion for missional living courses through the Baptist movement. Our humble beginnings as religious refugees choosing the convictions of conscience evidences this dedication as do over 160,000 Baptist churches today in 126 countries and territories striving to live with vibrant witness in their community and around the world. The challenge of Johann Gerhard Oncken, the nineteenth century "Apostle of European Baptists," continues to call us to an abiding commitment, "Every Baptist, a missionary." As Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21).

The call to every Baptist to live as a missionary sent by Jesus is as urgent as it has ever been. The rise of megacities with an outsized influence on the development of culture and politics and where there are often few to any Christians, entrenched poverty, massive migrant communities, and hundreds of millions of people who live without ever hearing the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ are living reminders that every Baptist is to be a missionary.

The challenges of a global pandemic that has devastated communities and significantly disrupted the methods of many churches will leave a lasting impact. Yet there are already countless Baptists around the world responding with Holy Spirit creativity as they seek to adjust changing methods to God's unchanging mission. It is why this Holistic Mission Guide is critical as leaders and practitioners from around the world reflect on ways in which they sense the mission of God being outworked in the midst of this disruptive moment.

The Holistic Mission Guide is a powerful reminder of God's unchanging mission. It is a collective testimony that holistic witness requires verbal proclamation, relational connectivity, justice, and transformational empowerment. It is our prayer that as we listen to one another as a global community shaped by particular experiences, locations, and cultures, we will draw closer to one another and hear more clearly the voice of God calling us to a world which he so loves. May the Lord bring his renewal and revival.

While the views expressed are that of the authors alone, we owe them our thanks for sharing their perspective and passion for holistic mission. We owe a further thanks to the reviewers, editors, and designers and our special gratitude to Rev. Everton Jackson, BWA Director of Integral Mission, who envisioned and collaborated to make this a reality. We owe an additional thanks to Merritt Johnston, BWA Director of Communications and Media, who poured her heart and countless hours into making this a global guide in the pursuit of God's global mission today. Would you join us in sharing this important resource with Baptists, pastors, and thought leaders around the world?

Filled with the Holy Spirit and sent by Jesus on God's global mission, every Baptist is a missionary.

Rev. Elijah M. Brown, PhD
General Secretary & CEO
Baptist World Alliance



FOREWORD

COVID-19 has impacted the way we do so many things in our daily lives, including the way we do church. The BWA Holistic Mission Guide emerged out of a need to collect and collate the varied global Baptist responses to the unprecedented disruption caused by the coronavirus and its impact on the normal way churches are organized for ministry. The fact is, there is no tried and tested template that could be referenced in these troubling and troublesome times. And so, the church community was forced to exercise its missional creativity and innovation to keep ministry alive. Surveys conducted by various research entities revealed a reduction in giving, curtailing in ministry activities, and increased use of technology in response to a wide range of restrictions imposed by various governments to contain the spread of the virus. The reality is that churches have been forced to organize for ministry differently and reimagine their future.

Churches and religious communities have not been spared the unprecedented impact of enormous trauma and disrupted economies, social life, leisure, work, and employment – literally everything. It is undeniable that the pre-COVID world is being replaced by a “new normal.” This new landscape will require both resilience and adaptation as well as an openness to embracing new ways of doing things and being church. The global pandemic has accelerated the quest for change that has been with us since time immemorial. COVID-19 has forced the church in a different direction and a revolutionary way of thinking and being church in this century. Revolutionary in this context implies sudden, fast, and different ways of functioning. The coronavirus left us with no choice; we were forced to resort to creative ways of fulfilling our mission. A vast number of churches had no other option but to turn to electronic platforms, which have given a faster and inevitable rise to digital worship. Everything has become digital: digital communion, digital sermons, digital giving, and digital mission.

With the virus galloping uncontrollably and leaving a trail of death in its path globally, feelings of anxiety enveloped many. Perhaps, the most painful experience in all of this is the isolation imposed by the virus for persons infected as well as family members of the infected. Many have died without the comforting benefit of having family members around them. Isolation in sickness, death, and burial has undoubtedly exacerbated the pain of bereavement, a pain that will take years for many to overcome. While the virus has led to the strengthening of many family ties due to the sharing of space over an unusual extended period, it must be admitted that it has caused strain on others. Apart from the painful reality of isolation by quarantine within the household, some family members experienced increased anxiety from being around family members for this sustained period. As the world plunged into suffering of unimaginable proportion and the church and unchurched groped in the dark for answers, the church had to rise to the occasion in fulfilling its prophetic, priestly, and compassionate functions. Together we found a new way of being church.

Therefore, the BWA Holistic Mission Guide is a compilation of case studies, stories, videos, and theological reflections from Baptists around the world outlining how they have interpreted and responded to the unpresented challenges created by the coronavirus. The BWA recognizes that within this Mission Guide, there are differing theological convictions and perspectives that give expression to the diverse nature of the global Baptist family. Therefore, contributions, both in print and video format are the perspective of the contributor and do not necessarily represent the official position of the BWA.

This project could not have been realized without the input of over fifty contributors representing the six regions of the BWA. Therefore, we place on record our gratitude to all contributors. To the members of the resource team who conceptualized the project, the editorial team whose meticulous work ensured a quality production and the communications division of BWA that formatted and designed the mission guide, we say thanks. As you journey through this Holistic Mission Guide, may you recommit afresh to the BWA mission – networking the Baptist Family to impact the world for Christ.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'E. Jackson', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rev. Everton Jackson
Director of Integral Mission
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THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS



A Future for Church?

Mark Craig | United Kingdom

*Hey you, out there in the cold
Getting lonely, getting old
Hey you, standing in the aisles
With itchy feet and fading smiles¹*

Many of us wonder about the future of church while asking ourselves some questions. One is about the attraction of an action. We've all stood during a service with an impossibly enthusiastic person exhorting us to "do the actions" (happily, you're just about to have the chance to "do some actions"). Another is - if music is from here (*do the actions, now - hold right arm out sideways horizontally*) to here (*do the same with left arm*), how did the church end up with a musical range that's often as limited as this (*hold palms facing each other about three inches apart*)?

A final one - why is it that so many services today are still so like the ones I remember going to with my grandparents, born in the days of Queen Victoria herself?

¹ Pink Floyd, "Hey You", 1979, The Wall.

Well, things are going to have to change. COVID-19 has forced us to look over the parapet – to do church differently. Surprise, surprise, the much-feared end times (of the church, not the world) haven't hovered into view. Technology has proved popular with all age groups. My 85-year-old aunt has got herself an iPad and mastered Zoom (which she's sure is some kind of magic) to the point where she's happily taking a regular part in her church's life.

The interesting bit is that her health hasn't allowed her to get to church in person for some years. Now, for the first time in ages, she's fully a part of the church, and she's loving it. She's not looking forward to the end of lockdown because she fears that the church will just revert to what it did before, and she'll be left once again with no way to engage. That's the key opportunity as we look to a post-virus future. We can learn from what we've needed to do in lockdowns and enable a very different kind of engagement.

COVID-19 has forced us to look over the parapet – to do church differently.

What's not on the table (at least for churches that want to thrive) is "going back to normal." We can't pretend the last year didn't happen and simply start doing what we were – largely unsuccessfully – doing before.

In one very large church in the central belt of Scotland, they're not sure that they'll ever go back to a weekly program of physical meetings. Their rapidly growing online program of engagement is reaching new audiences without losing existing ones. Before the virus, they had physical services and only one group of people came to them (quite a big group to be fair). They've gone from having one audience to three. The one they had before is still there meeting online in various ways, but they now have a second audience of those who were on the fringes of the church but rarely came. That group is growing with all kinds of new, unforeseen points of engagement with the church. And they've discovered a third audience – a large diaspora who used to go to the church, has moved elsewhere in the world, and is finding new ways to engage with it to their delight.

I'm pleased to be able to anticipate the death of the "we need a children's worker" guilt trip. I've heard so many churches buy in to the misguided lie that "if we get the children, we'll get the parents." Even if that were true (which it isn't), we shouldn't be doing it. Instead of a prevailing sense that we've somehow completely failed in engaging with children and young people, how about a new way forward? Churches who can afford a youth worker are starting to realize they'd be better seeking an online (or digital) pastor. Someone whose task is not to just replicate the Sunday service online. Instead, they'll aim to open up radical ways to engage with new audiences of all ages

and of all kinds because suddenly all bets are off. Sunday morning services – not necessarily. Having to wait until the mission workers come home to talk to them – why? Having to fight your way across town for a meeting – no need to. Digital engagement will also change the governance of many churches who are currently stuck because their constitution doesn't enable remote debate and voting. Like the church in vacancy who can't move forward because their governing instrument doesn't provide for anything other than people voting in a physical room. They can't even change that bit of their constitution because they all need to vote in a room to make the change!

Online isn't everything though. It can't replicate how we interact with each other physically. An online room doesn't allow us to interpret tiny changes in body language subconsciously or replace what we glean from the look in someone's eye. But it offers new engagements for new audiences, for new thinking, for new leadership, for new governance, for a new way of being church. For my 85-year-old aunt, she's so looking forward to that, and to great new ways² of engaging with the church she loves but can't ever physically attend.

Praise God.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. How have you responded to the new church environment caused by COVID-19?
2. How have people reacted to your responses? Think about both church-goers and also people outside the church.
3. Are there even more creative ways in which you could respond to the challenges of COVID-19, especially for people outside the church?

About the Author



After nearly 20 years as Director of Communications for BMS World Mission, Mark Craig retired in March 2021. In that time, he oversaw BMS' creative processes and resources, as well as contributing leadership to BMS' global strategy through his other role as an international facilitator of the LEGO® Serious Play® strategy methodology.

² Isaiah 43:18-19



A Time for Redeeming Human Sanity

Villo Naleo | India

As often quoted in the media, “These are extraordinary times, and we need extraordinary measures to beat this extraordinary virus.” People have suggested various pre-cautionary measures to fight the virus. We have seen that COVID-19 is an extraordinary global pandemic that began initially as a crisis only in Wuhan, China. Yet as the world watched China fight the virus, it was slowly creeping into the rest of the world.

The virus has turned the whole world upside down, forcing people to remain indoors. For once, the world came to a halt – facing economic, medical, food, and legal crisis. Though the term “crisis” sounds negative, it has both good and bad connotations. It is understood that the Chinese have an interesting lesson in the two characters which combine to convey the word *crisis*. One character is *danger* and the other is *opportunity*. Perhaps in every situation both elements are present. So a crisis could be a dangerous situation

presenting an opportunity. Yet the outcome is at bay – it all depends on our attitude and how we react to the situation.

Taking COVID-19 positively while not forgetting how people are suffering, this article aims to present a theological reflection on the pandemic. COVID-19 is spreading globally, leaving trails of death in the thousands, showing no mercy to the weak, young, or old. It is like someone who has a cold sneezed in a closed environment, leaving everyone in the room in danger of catching the cold. The size and persistence of the virus's impact is unfathomable, economically and medically. Though we want it to be over, no one can be sure when that may be. Medical studies are showing that COVID-19 is “less deadly but more transmissible than SARS.” Older people are at higher risk, not forgetting infants too. Though all human beings die at some point, this pandemic is a reminder of human frailty and limitations. It is an indication that we live in a fallen world where our fragile human body is susceptible to death, sickness, and pain – regardless of medical advancement and technological abilities.

I want to draw out some lessons from the story of Noah. Noah, the righteous man, faced a global crisis in the form of a flood. God's voice came to Noah asking him to make an ark. Noah thought God was joking, but the specifications of the height, length, width and types of wood to be used in making the ark convinced Noah that God was serious. Noah swung into action and was preparing for the flood to come. What Noah did was different than what many of us are doing. Noah listened to God's voice and was obedient to what God said to him, while others in his time nagged, mocked, and criticized him. These criticisms did not prevent him from building the Ark. The rain came pouring down, and Noah was “locked down” in the Ark for 371 days. His situation was no better than ours, but he persisted. The story has a happy ending with God making a covenant with Noah.

Prior to the flood, God regretted creating human beings and detested fallen human ways. We see the condition of the earth in Genesis 6:1-7. The earth was filled with wickedness, sexual immorality, corruption, and rebellion against God (disobedience). The flood was a direct judgment from God for human wickedness. I do not label this pandemic as a judgment from God, but let us not overlook the wickedness of our times. Yes, we are living in the age of grace, but that does not rule out God's judgment. God's judgment doesn't always end up in destruction; sometimes its goal is to redeem humanity.

The boundaries of sexual morality and what is seen to be acceptable in society has moved significantly over the years. Views about what is the acceptable moral norm range from one extreme to the other. Some would accept without question the current value system of the society one lives in,

while others would consider current societal norms verging on insanity. Definitions of sexuality are in flux, changing at different rates across nations and continents. The interpretation of God's parameters for sexual conduct is also a changing one, which represents a challenge for some.

We remain, in these issues as in many more, possibly sinful before God. The concern of many that evil is being both condoned and justified is an issue of morality. The ability to discern wisely and compassionately what God's message is in these times is a significant challenge for leaders as cultures across the world adapt, expand, and issue challenges for those in leadership as well as those who follow.

Meantime, God said that He will never destroy the earth again. Genesis 8:21 (NAS) says, "The LORD smelled the soothing aroma; and the LORD said to Himself, 'I will never again curse the ground on account of man, for the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth; and I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done.' God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth'" (Genesis 9:17, NIV). The rainbow became a sign of the covenant God made with Noah and the earth. What a comfort! Many people have made conclusive statements about the impact of COVID-19 and have said this is the end of the world. But we still have the rainbow appearing.

The lockdowns experienced across the world have been different in extent, in duration, and in compliance from people. The relative peace and space to think has offered us the opportunity to consider the place of science and technology, amongst other issues, including creation, sexuality, and society. The increasing complexity of balancing our rights with our responsibilities has challenged people of faith of all kinds as well as people of none.

For some, we have come uncomfortably close to believing we can 'play God' as a result of our medicine, sciences, and technologies. The rise of a new atheism and humanism creates significant challenges as people embrace the opportunities offered by wider exposure through media channels. The opportunity to embrace a simplicity in life has come under serious challenge from commercialism and globalism, with people chasing after new gods of time and money, believing that these pursuits can define them and offer greater meaning and success.

In the midst of money saving, valuing time, and the mad rush for success conundrum, the pandemic restricted or closed many working places. People felt uncomfortable to visit public places, schools, and colleges as these remained closed and many social activities were minimized. The pandemic has affected our lifestyle, our attitude toward visiting people, of people visiting us,

and much more. Besides that, the loss of jobs and non-payment of salary has become a reality for many. The price of commodities increased due to less supply, and buying groceries became a challenge. Comparatively in Nagaland, India, the pandemic was not severe, but the fear psychosis and rumors resulted in more shocks and chills.

Beginning from the month of February 2020, the Churches in Nagaland responded positively to the crisis of the pandemic. The Kohima Baptist Pastors Fellowship (KBPF) took charge of catering food and arranging shelter for the people in Quarantine Centres. In Dimapur, the Nagaland Missionary Movement (NMM) reached out to the people in need. The NBCC Convention Centre was utilized by the government as a kitchen for catering food to different Quarantine Centres. Likewise, many churches opened their church, guest house, dormitories, and other facilities to the people in need. Some schools and seminaries were turned into Quarantine Centres. Several churches organized chains of prayer for the frontline workers and caregivers and online counseling was offered via phone calls to those in distress.

On a positive note, I consider this pandemic a time for us to come back to our senses and acknowledge that there is a God, alive and active in our history. This pandemic is a sign from God that we need to mend our evil ways and turn to God for repentance. It is a time for us to remember that simple things in life can bring so much happiness, such as spending time with family and with oneself, eating organic leaves, planting vegetables, appreciating life in the village and farming, feeling the pinch of scarcity, and cooking food in our homes instead of invading food courts and stalls in the malls. By locking our doors but opening our food stores for the needy and by covering our mouth and not feeling suffocated, some of us have started to like our own breath. Walking miles without cars, sweating, and enjoying the roadside pavement. Less travel has created more quality time with family, etc. It is not a time to celebrate, but we have hope that God will show us the rainbow. For now, let us pray for the rain to stop, so that the flood of COVID-19 will recede.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. How has the pandemic been a danger to your ministry?
2. How has the pandemic been an opportunity in your ministry?
3. Just as God showed his faithfulness to Noah during the flood, how have you seen God's faithfulness during the pandemic?



About the Author

Dr. Villo Naleo has a Ph.D. in Peacemaking and serves as an Assistant Professor at Shalom Bible Seminary in Kohima, Nagaland. He is married to Toso and they have four children.



After the Pandemic: Where Do We Go from Here?

Jonathan Ingleby | United Kingdom

The most obvious comment about the news at present is that that we live in troubled times. And what troubles we have: a pandemic, a worldwide economic recession, Brexit, incompetent and power-hungry rulers, abuse of the media, a renewal of racialism and the climate emergency. No, my daily paper does not make happy reading.

“Where do we go from here?” It is the question some are asking. The danger is that many of us have framed a different question. We are simply asking, “What next?” We do not feel like the helmsman consulting the compass and then taking a new bearing. It is much more like being in a very small boat swept along by a powerful current with the sound of dangerous white water ahead of us. We are desperately looking around for a paddle by which we can steer the boat safely to shore, but there does not seem to be one.

Or have I got that wrong? Is it just that I am old (nearly eighty) and know that whatever else happens on my stretch of the river before long my boat will topple over the waterfall? Perhaps so. Still, looking at my fellow voyagers,

even among those much younger than I am, I do not detect much hope that things can change. Some are fearful, some are angry, some seem indifferent or even fatalistic. I suspect the majority never had much hope even before “the troubles” began. Their big desire now is “to get back to normal,” but when you look into it, “normal” was never up to much in the first place.

So how are we Christians getting along?

Not very well, I suspect, but let’s lay out some options. There are those who do not think that Christianity offers any sort of answers to the issues I am raising here. Christian faith is important to them, but it is essentially about something else. The planet may be in the process of being destroyed, millions are out of a job, the pandemic is raging, we are being ruled by the wrong people, but that is God’s business. We must just leave it all to him. The importance of Christian faith is that it provides us with an assurance that God is with us, whatever the circumstances, and that there are other Christians to whom we can turn for help and encouragement, and that everything will be all right in the end because we shall go to heaven to be with Jesus.

Now these are no small blessings! But it must be admitted that the experience as just described does not sound much like the Christian discipleship as understood by the early church. Just to point out a few obvious differences: for the first Christians, God was not so much *with them* in the sense of offering companionship as working *through them* (Acts 3:2,16). Again, the fellowship of the church was certainly mutually supportive, but it also had dramatic consequences in terms of economics (Acts 4:32), discipline (Acts 5:1-11), growth (Acts 2:41), witness (Acts 4:19,29), and persecution (Acts 5:40). They were looking forward to seeing Jesus again, but this was not meant to stop them from “turning the world upside down.” Indeed, it seems that they were being encouraged to see the inception of the new creation there and then (Acts 2:16-21), even if there was more to come.

We need, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to make all this practical and relevant to the twenty-first century. So here are some down-to-earth suggestions:

- After the pandemic is over, we can sort out the things that we can do better, not just the same as before. We can be more neighborly, more aware of the vulnerable, more supportive of those who have difficult jobs like National Health Service (NHS) workers, and less frightened to talk about life and death issues.

- We can take a lead in (or at least participate in) green issues locally. My friends in the green community are not all that impressed by the Christian response to the climate emergency. I know someone who has an electric car, sustainably sourced home heating, uses rainwater as her main supply, and has a kitchen free from plastic of any sort. She is not a Christian. Neither are the faithful supporters of the local Green Party nor the local members of the Extinction Rebellion movement. Why not?
- Christians should become active in political discourse, advocating for candidates who embody high moral standards without marginalizing those who we may not agree with. Like our Savior, we should seek to embrace the disenfranchised, speak for the less fortunate, and continuously raise our expectations for Christ-like behavior in the public arenas.
- How about taking up some of the traditional Christian causes: pacifism, criticism of greedy lifestyles, prison visiting, debt relief (loans without interest), living simply, and generally trying to live up to the Sermon on the Mount?

And much more. These are only examples.

My understanding of the New Testament description of where we are in God's timetable (and I think this reflects the thinking of a number of New Testament scholars) is that we are in the thick of it. The time is now. We are under "marching orders" from Jesus (Matthew 28:19, Acts 1:8) and the Kingdom – that is the practical experience and demonstration of the rule of God – which Jesus announced is, for the time being, in our hands. Of course, there is more to come. Who would not want to see "the restoration of all things" as Peter calls it (Acts 3:21)?

But the restoration of some things is possible now.

In the prelude to Peter's sermon (when he speaks about the restoration of all things) Peter restores the disabled person to full health *and* restores him to the worshipping community. Restoration, redemption, and renewal should be big Christian words, operative here and now.

To return to our previous picture – we are not, or should not be, drifting helplessly down the river. We are runners in a race and soldiers in a battle. This is not a time when we should quit the race or leave the battlefield. We have

not crossed the winning line yet or routed the enemy – though the Person ahead of us has. We can aim for that, but meanwhile the action continues.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Have there been times when you could relate to the metaphor of a boat being swept along by the current? If so, how did you respond?
2. What are some practical ways that you and your church can be more “neighborly”?
3. How are you actively engaged in caring for God’s creation?
4. What steps can you take to be part of the restoration process for your community?



About the Author

Jonathan Ingleby was on the staff of Hebron School in India for 20 years. Upon his return to the UK and until retirement, he was Head of Mission Studies at Redcliffe College. He is the author of several books on Christian mission.



Are You Curious?

Bill Wilson | USA

I wish you were more curious.

I wish we were more curious.

I wish I were more curious.

We desperately need churches and leaders that are curious. We need to be asking questions and exploring insights. To confess our ignorance, we need humility. Curiosity acknowledges that we don't know what we don't know.

Instead, we often get leaders that are over-confident, smug, callous, and disinterested in the latest information. We get churches that are more afraid than they are curious. We get organizations that harden around traditions and old-world thinking. We get people who over-remember the past, only want the familiar, and are paralyzed by the new.

Curiosity is a key ingredient in wisdom, insight, and foresight. When someone is curious, it implies that they recognize they do not have all the answers or know everything there is to know or that they need to know. Curiosity is a sign that the creative gene God implanted in every human being is active and alive. For Christians, curiosity implies that God's truth is far more expansive than our little corner of truth.

Sadly, most of us aren't curious. We have our minds made up and are detached from the wonder of the unknown. Many Christians no longer think but settle for spouting sound bites and ignoring those who disagree with them. Too often our faith comes across as rigid, defensive, locked in, and unmovable. We resemble the religious leaders that Jesus sparred with as he told parables designed to unlock their frozen curiosities.

Lately I've been curious about how language experts define the opposite of being curious. Some of the words that pop up as antonyms are: bored, apathetic, unconcerned, disinterested, perfunctory, callous, smug, severe, passionless. That, my friends, is the recipe for a dying church, a toxic culture, and a wasted life.

The rise of the COVID-19 pandemic and the epidemic of racism that are polarizing and paralyzing the United States call for more than the willful ignorance of a lazy mind. If we expect to not just survive but thrive in the new world before us, we will need a healthy dose of active curiosity to well up within us and smother our natural inclination toward defensiveness and/or indifference.

I believe that our current crises will only be transformed into avenues of blessing when we humbly adopt a commitment to cultivate a spirit of holy curiosity. When we do, we will discover in our wondering the imaginative power and vision of the Holy Spirit. It is in our curiosity that we will be inspired to dream dreams and see visions that are otherwise invisible to our closed minds.

Please pause this week and thoughtfully embrace holy curiosity before it is too late. Our world needs you. Your church needs you. Most importantly, God needs you to allow the Divine Dream for this world and its people to become your calling.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What programs have we been doing as churches that were not as important as we thought?

2. What have we NOT been doing that is a great deal more important than we knew?
3. Why is racism so pervasive and deep-rooted in our hearts and institutions?
4. What will our church do differently as a result of what we learned in 2020?
5. Who do we need to pay more attention to? Less?
6. What is God's dream for our church's relationship with all who live in our community?
7. What ways have we been reduced to conforming to our world rather than transforming it?



About the Author

Dr. William "Bill" Wilson founded The Center for Healthy Churches in January of 2014 and currently serves as its director. This followed his service as President of the Center for Congregational Health at Wake Forest Baptist Health since 2009. Previously he was Pastor of First Baptist Church of Dalton, Georgia, where he served since 2003. He brings over 33 years of local church ministry experience to CHC, having served as pastor in two churches in Virginia (Farmville Baptist Church and First Baptist Church Waynesboro) and on a church staff in South Carolina. Bill has led each of the churches he has served into a time of significant growth and expansion of ministry.



Back to Normal?

Victoria Aleksandravicene | Germany

The first months of 2020 posed an unexpected challenge to churches worldwide. A quick-spreading virus turned into a global pandemic, forcing individuals and churches into an indefinite period of isolation and what came to be known as “social distancing.” As a result of the measures introduced by governments, churches in various countries were forced to rethink their role as well as the way they carried out their functions. For many, this meant developing a stronger online presence and finding new and creative ways to engage their congregations and reach out to non-believers.

This unprecedented situation brought about multiple questions. What does a Christian response to a global pandemic look like? How is the church to make sense of the situation and its role within it? Are we to hope and pray for things to go “back to normal?” What does the Bible have to say about this? Although Scripture does not provide an account of heroes of faith persevering through a global pandemic, there are multiple instances of people going through

hardships and God doing amazing things through adversity. A certain pattern emerges through examining some of these instances.

One of the first accounts in the Bible that portrays people wishing to go back to normal is found throughout Exodus. Having been rescued from slavery and century-long oppression, the Israelites find themselves in a place where they need to fully trust and rely on God. This turns out to be challenging as they are led far from anything they previously knew. They cannot provide for themselves or their families simply through their own effort, and all that is left is to wait for God's provision and continue to follow him through the desert into an unknown land. On several occasions, they turn to Moses and the leaders with complaints, asking why they had to be taken out of Egypt and pleading to return to what was familiar and "normal."

What would Israel's story look like if the people were taken back to Egypt – back to normal?

What would have happened if God answered their pleas and gave them what they asked for? What would Israel's story look like if the people were taken back to Egypt – back to normal? And if the nation through which the Messiah was supposed to come was never brought out of slavery, what would the implications be for the rest

of humanity? God took the people of Israel through the desert, through challenges and hardships, and led them into the land he had promised – a place of safety and abundance, a land they could call home. Their time of struggle led them through the desert and into a land of blessing that extends through generations.

A similar pattern can be found in the account of Jesus's resurrection and ascension. It seems safe to assume that his disciples were overjoyed to see him again following the time of fear and uncertainty after Christ's crucifixion. Many probably envisioned things going "back to normal" – that they would continue to travel the country with their rabbi, listening to his teaching, witnessing miracles, and sharing meals. How terrifying it must have been for them to realize Jesus was not "back for good" but was soon going to ascend and leave them. And if God did grant them their wish, what would have happened if things truly did go "back to normal?" If Jesus remained with his disciples and never ascended, would they have ever gone "to the end of the world," teaching what they learned from Jesus and baptizing people? Without the ascension, would the Holy Spirit have been given to the early Christians?

After Christ's ascension, the first communities of believers started gathering, sharing their lives, and preaching the Gospel. Persecution followed shortly after, forcing the new believers to disperse into foreign lands. Many of them

probably wished that they could go back to Jerusalem and worship in peace. Yet the crisis they endured resulted in the spread of the good news about Jesus. Despite the deadly threat of persecution, the church grew and new communities were formed in places that may not have been reached for centuries if believers were not forced to move. God used the terrible circumstances to strengthen his people and grow his kingdom. So what would have happened if the early Christians lived in peace? What if they never had to leave Jerusalem? How long would it take for the good news to reach other lands? Where would we as the Baptist World Alliance be if these early Christians did not spread the Gospel outside Jerusalem?

The terror of a global pandemic cannot be minimized or ignored. Many have been suffering its consequences in the last year. Its seriousness calls for a solid biblical response. How do we as Christ's body respond to what is happening in the world around us? How do we make sense of it? Do we pray and wish to go "back to normal?" Do we see the promised land that God is leading us to? Some of these blessings and miracles are already at work around us.

In responding to the needs of its community and the surrounding society, the church has employed new, creative means to fulfill its role.

***The church's calling has not changed,
but the context in which it is lived out is changing.***

Making the best use of the available technology, churches are becoming more accessible not only to their immediate members but also to non-believers and other Christians who may otherwise not be able to physically attend church events. As a result, relationships between churches across the world and across denominations are being created and strengthened. Christians are utilizing a variety of skills and God-given gifts in helping their churches find creative solutions, and even helping other communities overcome the situation. Many churches have discovered new ways of ministry that will benefit them and their communities even after the end of the pandemic.

Finally, being called to be a light to the world, especially at a time of uncertainty, fear and loneliness, the church has become a source of creativity, hope, and fellowship.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. How am I praying through this time of fear and uncertainty? Do I wish things to go "back to normal" or do I expect to see God working miracles?
2. How has God blessed a) his church, b) me, and c) the community

around me throughout the past year? In what ways are his blessings already visible? How am I being a blessing to my local community?

3. How am I being intentional in seeking God's transformation and moving into a "new land" instead of "back to normal?"



About the Author

Originally from Bulgaria, Victoria Aleksandravicene has been serving at an international church in Frankfurt, Germany, for the last two years. She has a master's degree in Integrative Theology and Social Justice and is passionate to see the church growing and reaching out to its surrounding community.



A Christian-Buddhist Dialogue on Suffering

Rory Mackenzie | Scotland

There are a variety of responses to the COVID-19 pandemic within the Christian tradition. Some believers take the view that God is using these difficult circumstances to speak to Christians and non-Christians alike. As C.S. Lewis wrote, “God whispers to us in our happiness, speaks to us in our disappointment, and shouts to us in our pain.” Others, however, remind us that pandemics, epidemics, and plagues are not new but have been with us through the ages.

The fact remains that much has changed, with limits for many of us on activities like watching large sporting events, attending music gigs, shopping, travel, and visiting friends. Our duty as individual Christians and churches is to model faith over fear and to find ways of sharing hope despite the physical distancing and other measures we have adopted to curtail the spread of the virus. On a Zoom meeting I attended, the main speaker mischievously suggested that God closed the doors of our churches to let the Christians out

so they could engage with non-church attenders and try to answer their many questions – yet another view!

Suffering and consequences (*karma* – moral cause and effect) are two possible lenses through which a Buddhist may view COVID-19 and its devastating effects. Buddhists will think about suffering as an essential feature of life. Suffering (*dukkha*) is dissatisfaction with various aspects of our lives, including health, work, or relationships. We cannot always avoid difficult people and unpleasant situations. Change in relationships, health, and other circumstances often leaves us hurt or frustrated. In addition, we increase our sufferings by holding onto the past, reacting against our experiences, or blaming others. By recognizing that change is part of life and by not clinging onto things such as reputation, power, youth, and good health, we considerably reduce our sufferings.

A close friend of mine – a Buddhist – wrote to me. He is trying to bring about improvements in the Asian university where he is a senior lecturer. Unfortunately, he is experiencing stress (*dukkha*) as some of his colleagues have pushed back against many of his suggestions. His wife's response has been to take him to several well-known Buddhist temples in the hope that some of the chanting and sermons may “soothe” him. I can well imagine a monk at one of these temples telling my friend to practice meditation and follow the Buddhist precepts in a more rigorous manner – two crucial practices in the Buddhist faith to help a person deal with suffering and stress.

Some Buddhists may also find their minds turning to *karma*. Could it be that it is their *karma* to catch the virus and possibly die? But what is *karma*? *Karma* is derived from a root meaning “action” – intended or volitional action. As mentioned, moral cause and effect. Good *karma* produces good outcomes, and bad *karma* produces bad outcomes. There is no God in Buddhist understanding, so karmic outcomes should not be seen as a deity rewarding or punishing human behavior. *Karma* is best viewed as reproduction as the effect is in keeping with the cause. If you plant a potato, you will reap a potato – not a turnip! There may be a considerable time lapse between the effect of a particular cause or the outcome of a particular input. The “result” may be in a person's lifetime or in a subsequent life as Buddhists believe in reincarnation. From a Buddhist perspective, a person's *karma* generated in this life (and previous lives) determines the realm into which we are reborn, e.g., animal, angel, ghost, giant, god, or human.

Some Buddhists may believe that those who died as a consequence of the virus – or those who are suffering – could well have reaped or be reaping the effects of previous unskillful (immoral/unwise) actions in a previous life/lives. Indeed, *karma* helps some Buddhists understand why good people in comfortable situations suddenly face very difficult, even devastating, circumstances. As well as doing good in previous lives, these good people have also done something significantly wrong in their previous lives. We know what we have done in our current life, but (from a Buddhist perspective) we do not know what we have done in our previous lives. This leads to uncertainty and unpredictability for Buddhists who have a strong belief in karma. I remember the husband of a diligent Ph.D. student who told me that his wife did not expect a successful outcome to her research because of negative karmic actions that she may have carried out in previous lives.

Here are two possible Christian responses to the Buddhist understanding of karma. First, we may try to critique the Buddhist understanding of *karma*. Let's say that in a previous life I deliberately caused people to suffer, and as a consequence, my unskillful actions caused me to be reborn as an animal. As an animal, however, I do not have the capacity to work out the connection between my cruel deeds and lowly status as an animal. Even if I suffer failure and major suffering in this present life, how can I learn from my wrong choices which brought about these effects if I do not know what they were? It may be that this disconnect between previous lives, this current life, and future existences is the reason why some Buddhists are not motivated to do good and not restrained from doing bad.

Second, rather than challenging the Buddhist understanding of *karma*, we may use it to explain the death and resurrection of Jesus. Christians have long used the ideas of *karma* and the transfer of merit to explain the death of Christ to Buddhists. I have used it to good effect on many occasions with Buddhists and indeed non-Buddhists. I have begun by saying I think of the unskillful deeds I have knowingly carried out and the bad merit that has accrued, and thus what I one day will suffer either in this or future lives. I then consider the life of Jesus and the skillful deeds he carried out through teaching, healing, and other good deeds. Imagine the vast amount of merit that Jesus generated! According to the Christian Scriptures, Jesus did no unskillful action, so there is no negative karmic fruit for him to reap.

There are also several different understandings within Buddhism of the extent to which we may earn merit for others or draw on the merit of an enlightened being. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the various understandings of the transfer of merit (*punnadanna*). We begin by taking the Asian cultural concept of two people or parties not dealing directly with each

other but negotiating through a person who is acceptable by both people or parties. Jesus is both divine and human and so understands our limitations and vulnerabilities. As such, he functions as a “go-between” or a middleman between God and us.

When Jesus died on the cross of his own free will, the fruit of the bad karmic acts sown by humanity was reaped. Jesus suffered the negative results of all our unskillful actions. We carried out the actions, yet he suffered the consequences of these actions. When we believe that Jesus reaped our bad karmic fruit and the law of moral cause and effect (*karma*) has been satisfied, then all the good deeds that Jesus carried out are credited to us. Until we acknowledge that we have done wrong and that Christ functioned both as our substitute and hero to liberate us, we remain connected to our negative karmic actions and their consequences. By using this “redemptive analogy,” we are inviting a Buddhist to pass over to a new way of understanding life. It is a shift from self-dependence to trusting Jesus to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Some Buddhists, particularly in the Theravada tradition, will not accept that *karma* can be transferred in this manner. Yet even for them, I have found this analogy to be a good conversation starter. On hearing the account of the crucifixion of Jesus, some Buddhists may think that this painful and shameful death was brought about by some heinous crime committed by Jesus. I try to point out that in Luke’s telling of this story we find an astonishing demonstration of three key qualities that are respected by Buddhists. These are: *metta* (loving-kindness), *karuna* (compassion), and *upekkha* (even-handedness). Here, in the context of unimaginable pain and public humiliation, Luke 23:34 (NIV) recounts that Jesus spoke to God and said, “Father, forgive them [those who played some part in the death of Christ], for they do not know what they are doing.” This is a remarkable insight into the enlightened mind of Jesus – Son of God and friend of sinners.

Three Book Recommendations on Buddhism

A very accessible and extremely helpful overview of Buddhism and its main schools:

Cush, Denise, and Brian E. Close. *A Student’s Approach to World Religions: Buddhism*. London: Hodder & Stoughton Educational, 1994.

A first-class introduction to Buddhism, with more detail than Cush's book:
Harvey, Peter. *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

This book suggests a number of ways in which Christians may sensitively engage with Buddhists for example, chapter six discusses karma as a redemptive analogy:

Mackenzie, Rory. *God, Self and Salvation in a Buddhist Context*. Gloucester, (90 Sandylleaze, Gloucester, GL@ OPX, UK): Wide Margin Books, 2017.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What are some ways you have explained the COVID pandemic to non-church attenders?
2. How does Jesus function as a middleman between God and us?
3. What are some practical steps you can take to dialogue with peoples of other faiths?

About the Author



Rory Mackenzie, along with his wife Rosalyn, worked as church planting missionaries for 12 years in Thailand with OMF International (formerly Overseas Missionary Fellowship). They are involved in the Thai Buddhist community in Edinburgh, Scotland, where they now live. His doctoral research entitled "New Buddhist Movements in Thailand" was published by Routledge (2007). He has taught Buddhist studies in a variety of places, including Mahachulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand.



Evangelism, Discipleship, and Integral Mission in the Time of COVID-19

Moses B. Adebayo | Nigeria

Since COVID-19 invaded the world, different people have said different things. While some people believed it is a sign of God's anger against the world, some believed it is an attack from Satan. Some even believed that it is a sign of the end times. There is another group of people who believe it is scientifically motivated as a conspiracy of man against the world created by God. This implies that different people have different perspectives related to the emergence of COVID-19. At the same time, the church needs to be reminded about the missional purpose of the church.

In his book *A Light to the Nations*, Michael Goheen speaks about the missional identity of the church from the biblical point of view.³ He links both the Old and New Testaments together in addressing the missional goal of the

³ Goheen, W. Michael (2011). *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story*. Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, MI, USA.

church. According to him, the purpose of the church should not only be seen in terms of geographical expansion but also as a role model for the pagan world. The good news of the Gospel should be taken by the church to all corners of the world as commanded by our Lord (Matthew 28:17-19). The question then arises – how should the church relate to the outside world amidst a pandemic? This article is intended to focus on how the church could carry out its purpose of evangelism, discipleship, and integral mission in a time like this.

COVID-19

According to the World Health Organization, “Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease. It is a serious respiratory sickness in people associated with a large market in Wuhan, China.” By implication, coronavirus is not necessarily a strange virus in the world, but this particular one was newly discovered and was first discovered in a 55-year-old individual from Hubei province in China on November 17, 2019.⁴ In most developing countries of the world, especially Africa, there has been a serious argument about the reality of COVID-19. In December 2020, when Western countries were battling with the second wave of the pandemic, most people in Nigeria thought otherwise. I saw people shaking hands freely and gathering in large numbers without observing social distancing and various other precautions. They felt it was not real. Not until recently did people begin to feel the reality of the disease.

Role of the Church

The role of the church is to reach out to its community in mission. Since the essence of discipleship is to engage the people around us at home, in the church, and in the world with the love of God, then mission is what every Christian does in the world by relating with people in the consciousness of God and making Christ known to everyone that comes in contact with them. According to Goheen, the purpose and identity of the church is termed “missional,” which means a geographical expansion involving taking the good news of the Gospel and Christ to unreached people groups and neighbors. The challenge for the Church here is to take up its task in the reformation and renewal of all life, rather than becoming another isolated customer center. The Church’s role in teaching, caring for the poor, and providing social connections should be shaped by the biblical story without losing its ecclesial form. Evangelism is the command to go as a reaper and sower of the kingdom of God without considering the circumstances. Evangelism is also to tell sinners of the joy that is in Christ Jesus, warning them against the judgment of God.

⁴ South Morning China Post, accessed on April 22, 2020.

How can the church reach out in this period? The church should not only preach the Gospel but reach to its immediate community by emphasizing the following:

- Observing restrictions and various government rules on lockdown, social distancing, wearing masks, minimizing traveling, handwashing, and other protocols
- Having faith in Jesus Christ for protection in times like this. Drawing from various Bible passages like Psalms and Romans 8:39
- Praying
- Supporting mental health
- Reducing church gatherings and social meetings
- Providing online worship service and discipleship

Integral mission means holistic mission. It is a term which describes an understanding of Christian mission that embraces both evangelism and social responsibility. We call it “the 3 or Gospel tripod stand” – a ministry of preaching, teaching, and social healing. It means that the Gospel is not complete if people’s needs are not attended to. The Church at this critical time should set the pace for showing love to the world. There is a wide scope of social concerns, which are considered to be the fourth angle of the Gospel message that the Church should not close its eyes against (Deuteronomy 15:11, Luke 4:18). The Church should distribute and show adequate concern for the needy, the poor, and vulnerable people around us. We should not wait until Christmas time and the Easter period to lend support to weak and vulnerable people. The time is now.

COVID-19 as a Sign of the End Times

Jesus told his disciples in Luke 21:8-19 what would happen before the end will come – these are the signs of the end times. Of course, COVID-19 was not specifically mentioned in the passage, but Jesus Christ talked about pestilences. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, pestilences are “contagious or infectious epidemic diseases that are virulent and devastating.”⁵ From this definition, it can be inferred that COVID-19 is one of the signs of the end times. Jesus talked about it because of its devastating effect on the entire world. Therefore, the onus is on every Christian to intensify evangelism, discipleship, and mission because these are what must be done in all nations of the world before the second coming of Jesus Christ. The Bible

⁵ Merriam-Webster Mobile Phone Dictionary, 2020 version.

says, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14, NIV).

Social Media as a Means for Evangelism, Discipleship, and Mission

COVID-19 has brought a new normal for the church. Social media and internet ministry are an effective way to evangelize non-Christians, disciple Christians, and introduce the love of God to our potential audience. The emergence of the pandemic has made us realize that the evolution of the internet is the handiwork of God. In light of the challenges of COVID-19, “The internet and other aspects of information and communication technology are not only about technology, they are means to the gospel, the Great Commission.”⁶ Before the outbreak of the pandemic, not many older generation pastors, especially in Africa, appreciated the relevance and importance of social media. But according to Nkem Osuigwe, the pandemic has given a new definition to illiteracy. An illiterate is someone who does not understand how to use information and communications technology (ICT) for life and ministry in the 21st century.⁷ Therefore, these are the days when Christians are expected to maximize all social media to tell the world, to teach the world, and to train the world about the love of God through Jesus Christ. The following are examples of technology through which we can evangelize, make disciples, and do mission in the time of the pandemic:

- Smartphones / SMS and text
- Electronic greetings
- Internet faxing
- Webcasts
- Zoom and Skype
- Social networking services like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube among others

Conclusion

According to Nicky Gumbel, “God has a purpose for your life. He is in control of the universe. He is able to take even bad things you have done or have been

⁶ Alabi, A Samuel (2014). *Effective Contemporary Shepherding: A Practical Theology for the 21st Century Pastoral Ministry*. Nigeria: Simplex Creations, Hamjel Arcade, 47, Alafia Street. Mokola, Ibadan.

⁷ Osuigwe, Nkem (2020). In his speech as the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary Alumni President at the 2020 Minister’s Conference.

done to you and turn them for good.”⁸ The Bible says, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28, NIV). COVID-19 is definitely a sign of the end times as revealed by the Scripture. Christians must accept it as a challenge we have to face in the world on our Christian pilgrimage and trust God that He will keep us safe and sound from the attack of the pandemic. Jesus said, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. *In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world*” (John 16:33, NIV, emphasis added). Meanwhile, social media should be maximized for Christian ministries because it has come to stay. It is indeed a great means for communication in the 21st century mission frontier. Its role in contemporary Christian ministry cannot be overemphasized. Christians should take advantage of social media to fulfill the mandate of the Great Commission.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What is your perception of Nkem Osuigwe’s definition of illiteracy?
2. How is your church or organization using social media to engage your community?
3. What steps can you take to ensure you are ministering in a way that reflects the three facets of the “Gospel tripod stand”?



About the Author

Moses B. Adebayo, D.Min., is an alumnus of the prestigious University of Lagos in Nigeria where he obtained a degree in Accounting. Moses is a theologian who pursued his theological training at the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary in Ogbomosho, Nigeria, where he obtained both a Master of Arts in Theological Studies and a Doctor of Ministry. He has completed his Master of Arts in Global Studies (Missiology Major) at Providence University and Theological Seminary in Otterburne, Canada.

He has served as the Vice President of Finance and Investment for the Nigerian Baptist Convention and the Treasurer of the All Africa Baptist Fellowship. He is a member of the Nominations Committee and the Commission on Mission of the Baptist World Alliance. He is married to Christiana, and they have four children.

⁸ Gumbel, Nicky (2020). Bible in One Year, 2020 Edition, in <https://www.bibleinoneyear.org> retrieved on April 22, 2020.



Faith in the Time of COVID-19: Why Should We Respond?

Roshan Mendis | Sri Lanka

These are indeed fearful and anxious times. The Psalmist, as he faced diverse dangers, seemed to mirror our sentiments at times such as this. Psalm 31 echoes many of the feelings and circumstances we are currently experiencing. The coronavirus pandemic has caused our world to hear “terror on every side” (Psalm 31:13, NIV). But the Psalmist placed these feelings of dread between two sureties both at the opening and end of the psalm as he concluded saying, “I trust in you, Lord ... My times are in your hands ... In you, O LORD, I have taken refuge.” With this in mind, Christians who draw their values and beliefs from God’s given revelation should respond in a distinctive way. And in that context of trust are several roots that form the basis for why we should respond.

Our Biblical Roots

When disasters are recorded in Scripture, sometimes we are given an explanation of why it happened and sometimes we are not. Jesus, on one occasion in Luke 13:1-5, used a recent tragedy to set aside suppositions and

redirect people's attention to the real issue. In most cases, whatever the cause, a disaster was a wake-up call for the population.

The Church's concern for COVID-19 should also be rooted in its theological foundations. Biblically, every human being is made in the image of God, and thus is entitled to dignity and respect. This truth was established long before the United Nations' (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This means that, as the body of Christ and as fellow believers, we have a responsibility and obligation to care for those in difficult circumstances. In as much as this foundation falls within our mandate of care, it also falls in line with the command of Jesus to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Our Historical Roots

Christians in ages past were no strangers to epidemics. It has been said that the way we respond to disasters (including epidemics) has to do with our values and views of life, death, and humanity. There have been outbreaks of plague and serious devastation approximately every decade.⁹

In response to these outbreaks, Christians wrote many "flight theologies," seeking to expound what steps a Christian could take with a clear conscience. Johann Hess asked Martin Luther, "Whether it is proper for a Christian to run away from a deadly plague?" An article that resurfaced recently in the light of COVID-19 and the church's response to it was the response to this question.¹⁰ For Luther, our loving God though hidden, surely works for our good even in the places we do not expect, including amid the evil of deadly epidemics. The fear of bodily illness and death should drive us to pray and to care for our souls, remembering that this world is not our lasting home. Luther regarded the epidemic as a temptation that tests and proves our faith and love. Christians must think first how to contribute to the physical and spiritual care of those who are vulnerable, self-isolated, sick, or dying. Only then did Luther permit Christians to make private decisions about whether to flee. He quotes Psalm 41 (NKJV, "Blessed is he who considers the poor. The Lord will deliver him in the day of trouble."

⁹ "'It's the Patient's Fault': Simone Simoni and the Plague of Leipzig, 1575," Taylor & Francis, n.d., <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17496970701819319?scroll=top&needAccess=true&journalCode=rihr20&>.

¹⁰ Grayson Gilbert, "Martin Luther and His Incredible Response to the Black Plague," The Chorus In The Chaos (Patheos Explore the world's faith through different perspectives on religion and spirituality! Patheos has the views of the prevalent religions and spiritualities of the world., March 5, 2020), <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/chorusinthechaos/martin-luther-and-the-black-plague/>.

What does this mean for us and COVID-19? Our attitude toward COVID-19 should be marked not by panicking and stockpiling so many masks that there are not enough for healthcare workers or so much pasta or grocery items that others cannot find any. Instead, we should be asking, "How can we as a church and I as an individual help those in need?"

Our Ecclesiastical Roots

By the fourth century, it is said that the churches in Rome were feeding an estimated 20,000 people each week. The church at that time presented to the world a visible alternative to the prevailing social order.¹¹ Churches are, of course, integral parts of their communities and are often on the frontlines responding to disasters, both practically and pastorally. Experience from previous epidemics has shown that churches are particularly well-placed to build trust and hope, to counter fear, and to build community resilience as well as individual mental and spiritual resilience. Below are several comments of lessons learned in the response of faith-based agencies and churches during the recent Ebola crisis in East Africa.

Dr. Janice Proud, Anglican Alliance Relief and Programme Manager, commenting on the Ebola outbreak report and the response of the churches, said, "Once faith leaders were involved, the report found that they were transformational due to their trusted, respected long-term presence in communities and their ability to contextualize the response to take into account local beliefs and traditions."¹² The World Council of Churches (WCC) consultation, held September 29, 2014, in Geneva, Switzerland, affirmed a greater role for the churches and faith-based organizations in helping to stop the epidemic. Dr. David Nabarro, the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy for COVID-19, said churches and faith-based organizations have a massive role to play in dealing with emotional, psychological, and spiritual aspects of people's lives, engaging them on questions of life and death.¹³

¹¹ "The Church Her Nature and Task", *The Universal Church in God's Design, Vol I*, SCM Press, 1948. quotes from Georges. Florovsky, Antinomies of Christian History: Empire and Desert," *Christianity and Culture*. Vol. II of *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, Nordland Publishing Company: Belmont 1974, 67-100.

¹² "Churches Key Responders in Battle against Latest Ebola Outbreak," Churches key responders in battle against latest Ebola outbreak, n.d., <https://www.anglicannews.org/news/2019/07/churches-key-responders-in-battle-against-latest-ebola-outbreak.aspx>.

¹³ "Churches and Agencies Formulate Responses to Ebola Outbreak," World Council of Churches, October 1, 2014, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/churches-and-agencies-formulate-responses-to-ebola-outbreak>.

Our Faith Roots

Disasters of this nature only highlight to us our fallibility and limitations. This pandemic has made us aware how vulnerable we are. It has altered what we thought was valuable in life. We realize the value of the very air we breathe as we spend thousands of euro for one day on a ventilator.

Anxiety and stress are common factors of society today, and as believers we are not an exception to experiencing such emotions. Fear has become a constant companion. As the Church, this presents another opportunity to minister hope and encouragement to people. “Do not fear, for I am with you” are words of Scripture often echoed, and they are a strong affirmation of God’s presence as we face this crisis. Above all, the church is the community of hope. And hope comes from what we do and who we are.

As Christian leaders in uncertain times, our first response must be to love our neighbors. In this moment, this includes taking early, active measures to protect against the transmission of the coronavirus while being a source of peace, clarity, and hope in a time of confusion. It is time for us to understand and practice the fact the Church is not the building but its people out serving in society.

***In my local church, we sent out a photograph of the empty church
with the words, “The church has left the building.”***

We are also called to lament at this time. Dr. Ajith Fernando in a reflection on Romans 8 writes, “...The whole creation is subjected to frustration (8:20). There is sickness, disappointment, pain, and death. That frustration includes us ... who have a taste of what heaven is like here and now. But we groan (8:23) with the rest of creation (8:22). Through that groaning with the rest of creation, like Jesus, we develop deep ties with the world and have a deep impact on it.”¹⁴

There are also questions that many churches are asking around the current coronavirus pandemic:

- Is our Christian testimony damaged when we cancel our worship services and gatherings?

¹⁴ “Corona Virus and Psalm 91,” Our Daily Bread Ministries, March 31, 2020, <https://ourdailybread.org/corona-virus-and-psalm-91-lk/>.

- Is the integrity of our gatherings compromised when we cancel them?
- Is it a reflection of our lack of faith when we cancel?
- Is it a lack of commitment when we fail to gather and avoid gatherings?

A few guidelines were suggested by the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka regarding these concerns:

- God is concerned with humanity's holistic wellbeing (Leviticus 17-26). These reveal that the physical, social, economic, and religious are closely intertwined and that hygienic laws have spiritual bearings and social laws have spiritual impact.
- Christians need to consider the wider community in decision-making (1 Corinthians 6:12). Acting upon our individual preferences may cause us to fail to act in love (Romans 14:15).
- Zeal and knowledge must go hand in hand (Proverbs 19:2). One cannot make decisions using "faith" as the sole criteria in the face of overwhelming other information. Facts are God's signposts in making faith-based decisions. The two – faith and facts – are not contradictory but complementary.
- We must maintain the balance between divine order and human responsibility.

Our Mission Fruits

Times of disaster, as we have seen right from biblical times, were a means for the church to engage in mission – a mission of compassion and demonstration of the love of Christ. We also see in the book of Acts that with every crisis the early church grew. Every crisis that scattered and sent the church underground caused its growth. We also see an example of compassionate ministry in looking after the widows as well as the famine aid collection for Jerusalem. As mentioned earlier, the two epidemics in the second and third centuries that overtook the Roman empire were the reason for the growth of the Church.¹⁵ It is said the Church grew from an estimated 45,000 believers at the time of the epidemic to over 1.1 million believers by the time the second epidemic struck in 251 AD.

¹⁵ Stark, Rodney. *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion*. New York: HarperOne, an imprint of HarperCollins, 2012. <https://tuhosakti.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/the-triumph-of-christianity.pdf>

Conclusion

As we consider the coronavirus pandemic, let us realize that while it is virulent and pervasive – causing almost the entire world to come to a grinding halt – God is still at work. Whatever the reasons and causes for this, in his sovereignty the Lord has not been caught unaware. He is not in a panic or a fright. Just as Scripture promises us, he is able to make a way in the desert and God turns everything we experience into good (Romans 8:28), making us more than conquerors in all things (Romans 8:37). Therefore, this is an opportunity for us as the Church to survive and serve in this crisis. This is a time when we are reminded more than ever how much we need each other – to be a channel of blessing to the nations and to minister his Word to a troubled and anxious population. Let us pray for one another as we together seek to be light and hope in this hurting and fearful world. We are called for such a time as this for together we are stronger.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. In what ways have you lived out the concept that “the church has left the building”?
2. Has the pandemic opened doors for you to engage with people on questions of life and death? If so, how did you respond?
3. How do you think the pandemic has been a catalyst for growth within the global Church?



About the Author

With more than 25 years of experience in the field of aid and development, Roshan Mendis is the Director of Asia Pacific Baptist Aid (APBAid). Having served hands-on in grassroots and management environments, Roshan is a sought-after resource person in development practice, particularly in the areas of Integral Mission and Advocacy, and a preacher and teacher.



God Is Not in Crisis

Devora Stefanny Barreto Hurtado | Peru

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff,
they comfort me.
Psalm 23:4 (NKJV)*

Sometimes with cold, sometimes with a little sun, sometimes with a lot of interruption of the sounds around us, distractions, and even with not so comfortable chairs, sometimes with so many spectators that it left some of us standing without a chair. At other times, sharing evangelistic tracts to those who passed by or were taking their children or dogs to the park, and also at the top of our lungs preaching Jesus through a megaphone trying to reach the ears of those who were at home or around the park. Even through our masks, distancing, and antibacterial alcohol, we wanted to let everyone know that there is hope in times of crisis – that there is a God who is alive and working in the midst of such a chilling world scenario. This is the small scenario that I can describe for you, so that you can know a little about the

missionary and church work of the Grace and Truth Baptist Mission in Villa Victoria (Lima, Peru) in a small park of the same sector in the context of a pandemic. And you may ask, why are they meeting in a park? Because church buildings are closed.

It is clear the world is going through a time of "integral crisis." When I say integral, I mean it is a crisis in every sense, not only in a health crisis but also in the spiritual, emotional, mental, social, and relational part of each person.

What is the church of God doing in the face of this crisis? As a mission, and together with our leaders Deiser Campos and Josemir de Campos and children and other members, we have been implementing a work for the Lord based on communion and spiritual formation among the members of this church. Also, with courage and willingness, we have been doing discipleship with caution in a personal way and by phone call. We have also offered evangelism of impact or person to person as a sign of compassion toward those who do not know the Lord in this context of crisis.

We have simply decided that if God is not in crisis, we should not be either. On the contrary, it is our duty to spread and reflect our Lord Jesus Christ in the hope, confidence, faith, courage, and strength that only He can give – knowing that is what the world needs. We are not a church that retreats in the face of the crisis. We are not a mission that is silent or remains as a part of the spiritual problem in this context of pandemic. We have decided to believe in the Lord and trust Him, to communicate the strength and faith that the world needs. We have this confidence: "The LORD has done great things for us, and we are glad." (Psalm 126:3, NKJV). Oh yes, God has done and will do great things with those sons and daughters who take a risk in this context of crisis. We are not like unbelievers. Although we are human and capable of feeling the turmoil of the crisis in the world, above that we are called to be light.

You are the light of the world; a city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.
(Matthew 5:14, NKJV)

And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.
(John 1:5, NKJV)

For so the Lord has commanded us: 'I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, that you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth.'
(Acts 13:47, NKJV)

*Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works
and glorify your Father in heaven.*

(Matthew 5:16, NKJV)

We are willing to die to ourselves in order to prudently fulfill the will of our God. Our life in Christ does not make us a lazy, negligent, or careless church. On the contrary, it awakens us, exhorts us, and makes us active to live righteous lives and to do good. I want to end by communicating to you that we are joyful about the way in which God continues to manifest himself through the new and old believers within the mission. It is a blessing to continue to grow in times of crisis. The truth of the matter is that if we do not serve today in the conditions we have, unfortunately we are not likely to do it when all this passes. The problem is not the current condition – the problem is our unwillingness to serve with obedience, care, and great caution in this time. If God is not still and silent now, neither should we be.

May God bless, enlighten, and guide your lives. We love you in the Lord.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What steps can you and your community take to be a church that does not retreat in a crisis?
2. What do you think it means to be the “light” in the midst of these dark times?



About the Author

Devora Stefanny Barreto Hurtado graduated with honors from Centro de Capacitación Misionero Transcultural in Valencia, Venezuela, as a church planting missionary. She is part of supporting and training in the Grace and Truth Baptist Mission in Villa Victoria. She is married to Alberto Herrera, and they make their home in Lima, Peru.



Justice and Compassion: Mission in Post-COVID Society

Jonathan Ingleby | United Kingdom

Reflecting on Mark 6:30-44

I am composing these thoughts on the day that the number of coronavirus deaths in the United States has topped a quarter of a million. In response, I want to begin with the well-known verse in Mark 6:34 (NAS) where we read that Jesus saw a great crowd and “had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things.” I wonder whether we often look at people in the mass as crowds and think about them as Jesus did. T.S. Eliot wrote about the crowds going to work on a cold winter morning in London.

*"Under the brown fog of a winter dawn
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many
I had not thought death had undone so many."*

The last line is a quotation from Dante who saw the crowds jostling on the riverbank waiting to be ferried by Acheron across the river Styx to hell. In our passage Mark uses the Greek word *splagchnizomai*, which taken literally means "having one's guts torn apart." In some ways, compassion is where mission starts, though perhaps one should immediately add that it is not where it ends. Required are not just "the passions and sentiments of the heart" but also solidarity and intervention.

***Jesus's compassion, though clearly a powerful emotion,
ushered in a program of action.***

As the story in Mark 6:30-44 develops we see that one important concern was that people were, or became, hungry. Food, in fact, plays a central role in Mark's narrative. Thus, Jesus and his disciples were so busy that they did not even have "leisure to eat." Later, there is the question about how an evening meal is to be procured for such a great crowd, and there is the feeding itself. But food and feeding are not Jesus's initial concern. He had compassion on the crowd because they were "sheep without a shepherd." Importantly, Jesus did not feed them – he taught them. Also, the idea of a shepherd in Jewish literature usually referred to more than somebody out on the hillside looking after sheep. It meant a ruler or leader. For example, in Numbers 27:15-17, Moses asks the Lord to appoint someone to lead the people into battle "so that the congregation of the Lord may not be sheep without a shepherd." Similarly, Micaiah, in a vision, sees Israel defeated in battle and "scattered on the mountains, like sheep that have no shepherd" (1 Kings 22:17).

What the people lacked in both of the Old Testament references was leadership and organization. However, leadership and organization are evident in this Gospel story of the feeding of the five thousand. The people were asked to sit down in an orderly way so that the food could be easily distributed, and the leftovers were carefully collected. There is a nice progression here: compassion, teaching, organization, provision. This same verse about Jesus's compassion and the leaderless sheep is attached in Matthew 9:36-37, not to the feeding but to the admonition of the disciples to pray for more workers to bring in the harvest. The wandering sheep and the ready harvest needed to be gathered in and restored to usefulness.

Here I want to introduce three further themes.

Justice

We have already noticed the shepherd reference in Numbers 27 in the appointment of Joshua. Shepherds as rulers and leaders are also mentioned in

Ezekiel and Zechariah, though in both cases because they were acting unjustly (see Ezekiel 34:1-6 and Zechariah 11:4,5). The ruling class was protecting its privilege rather than the prosperity of the people, becoming predators instead of shepherds. When Jesus saw himself as the "good shepherd" (this is John rather than Mark), he was by contrast "a shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11).

Sharing (Equitable Distribution)

Another theme being invoked here is the people being fed in the wilderness. This is more developed by John's Gospel, but it is in the background of the synoptic accounts too. The whole exodus event, like the feeding here, stemmed from a compassionate consideration of need (Exodus 3:7,8). But the exodus was not only a deliverance from Egypt. God was determined to constitute a people. He gave them covenant and law – teaching comes first as in our story – and he established the community based on what Ched Myers calls "Sabbath economics." At the heart of this was again the question of food, that is the manna in the wilderness. God provided this but based on fair shares for all – enough with no surplus and no hoarding. If they tried to hoard it, the food went bad, which is what always happens to hoarded wealth. To put this into a modern context, here is an excerpt from contemporary author Barbara Kingsolver in *The Poisonwood Bible*:

(Anatole talking to Leah about sharing.)

"When one of the fishermen, let's say Tata Boanda, has good luck on the river and comes home with his boat loaded with fish, what does he do?"

"He sings at the top of his lungs and everybody comes, and he gives it all away."

"Even to his enemies?"

"I guess. Yeah. I know Tata Boanda doesn't like Tata Zinsana very much, and he gives Tata Zinsana's wives the most."

"All right. To me that makes sense. When someone has more than he can use, it's very reasonable to expect he will not keep it all himself."

"But Tata Boanda has to give it away, because fish won't keep. If you don't get rid of it, it's just going to rot and stink to high heaven."

Anatole smiled and pointed his finger at her nose. "That is just how a Congolese person thinks about money."¹⁶

It is instructive that it is probable the Israelites were tasked with building storehouses while slaves of the Egyptians. Sabbath economics out in the wilderness with food gathered by all and "consumed at the point of need" was an example of God's sharing justice in operation.

Another brief example from the Old Testament is an Elisha feeding story (2 Kings 4:42-4). Mark may have had this story in mind when he was writing here. The Elisha feeding story (there are several of these) took place in the context of famine. In a way, that was true of the context of Jesus's ministry. There was "a whole lot of hunger going on." In the Elisha story, the man brought first fruits, a sort of tithe. There is a complicated piece of intertextuality going on here. In the incident of the disciples eating grain, they were criticized by the Pharisees (Mark 2:23-8) perhaps as much for breaking the tithing laws as for profaning the Sabbath. Jesus's riposte was that David and his companions were hungry when they broke the ritual law. Here we have part of a long-running controversy over hunger, tithing, and distribution, which were sharing issues. There are several such examples in the Gospels.

Organization

Sharing fairly (justly) does not just happen. As the disciples pointed out, feeding a multitude was no small matter. There were practicalities. They did not have enough money for a start. Let me quote Myers here:

"Twice the disciples suggest to Jesus that the solution to the hunger of the crowds is to 'buy' food (6:36f – the first appearance of *agorazein* in Mark). But Jesus's solution has nothing to do with participation in the dominant economic order. Instead, he determines the available resources, *organizes* (italics mine) the consumers into groups (6:39f), pronounces the blessing (cf. 14:22), and distributes what is at hand (6:41)."¹⁷

¹⁶ Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (London: Faber and Faber, 2017).

¹⁷ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man a Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 206.

I like the phrase "Jesus's solution has nothing to do with participation in the dominant economic order." (In the midst of the current pandemic, that is something of a relief!) I suspect this principle is still true today or ought to be. The solution also does not have much to do with the disciples' resources. They appear to have had a certain amount of money and a small amount of food. But these were totally inadequate. I am afraid that our "riches" – stored wealth, technology, institutions – such as they are not just inadequate, but they usually get in the way. We are as the saying goes "too rich to help the poor." So here we have a range of ideas – compassion, teaching, feeding, leadership, justice, sharing, organization.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What are the lessons for a post-pandemic world?
2. What do we see that awakes our compassion?
3. What are ways we can teach with the goal of inspiring "sharing"?
4. In what ways can you and your church community exemplify a sharing approach?
5. What do we need to organize?
6. On whom or what are we relying?
7. Can we "bring forth" justice?
8. Can the hungry, in both a physical and spiritual sense, be fed?



About the Author

Jonathan Ingleby was on the staff of Hebron School in India for twenty years. On return to the United Kingdom and until retirement, he was Head of Mission Studies at Redcliffe College. He is the author of several books on Christian mission.



Misery, Messages of Hope, and Miracles

Winston Garner, Jr. | Guyana

Reflecting on 2 Kings 7:1-8

The nation of Guyana has some unique characteristics. Its people represent many races. It is considered part of the Caribbean, but geographically it is not. It is the only nation in South America whose official language is English. Some of the indigenous people maintain their language, yet many in the southwest by the Brazilian border speak fluent Portuguese and there is a rapidly growing Spanish-speaking population. However, what is not unique to Guyana are the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The cases are rising, and people are dying. Like the rest of the world, this nation is experiencing what humanity everywhere is facing.

Life is filled with highs and lows, ups and downs, progress and setbacks, norms and inevitable changes. But in whatever season of life we find ourselves, God is there. The children of God should never forget these words

of Jesus after his resurrection and just before his ascension: “ ... surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20b, NIV). Throughout the ages, people have faced times of misery, but God provided messages of hope and performed miracles.

In 2002, as the people of his nation faced tough times, renowned Caribbean Baptist theologian Rev. Dr. Burchel Taylor said, “For many persons, life is now experienced as a burden instead of a blessing – a burden too painful to bear and too heavy to confront.”¹⁸ It has been the experience of people worldwide at various points in their lives and even in the history of their nations.

In 2 Kings 7, we find that God’s people were facing times of misery. They were facing a famine, so food was in short supply and at high prices. This resulted in many people going without food. No food eventually results in death. As bad as this was, Samaria was also under siege by the Syrian army. They could be attacked at any time and easily defeated because of their lack of food. One can only imagine the distress of the people in that nation. However, if the situation was bad for the average person, it was even worse for persons with leprosy. Famine or no famine, besieged or not, life was already hard for people with this disease. Their misery included being isolated from friends, family, and the wider society. It would have been a little easier for them if at that time they had the technology we have today where we can see and speak to each other from across the globe. How fortunate we are today!

Nevertheless, this does not reduce the different challenges we face. Francis, a church member, explained that 2020 has been a difficult year for him. There have been five deaths in his family. Moreover, for two weeks now a relative who has a severe case of diabetes has been on a ventilator as he battles with COVID-19. Francis is particularly worried about his elderly parents who are not in the best of health and have been enduring bad news after bad news.

Hilary has been working with an organization for more than a decade, but she feared that she has not been at the organization long enough to receive any benefits. As a single parent living in a relative’s house, her desire was to build her own home by purchasing building materials supplied by her organization at a discount price. She worked six days a week, yet she found it difficult to save money over the years because of her small earnings. Then came the pandemic that made life even more difficult.

Sharonda is a hardworking teacher at a leading school in the country. She has been looking forward to a promotion, but the pandemic forced the sudden

¹⁸ These words of Rev. Dr. Burchel Taylor were quoted in a sermon preached by Rev. Fr. Michael Elliott at an Ordination Service at the Cathedral of St. Jago de la Vega Spanish Town, Jamaica, on Sunday, July 2, 2017 – Diocese of Jamaica & The Cayman Islands. Retrieved from <http://www.anglicandioceseja.org/?p=9942>.

closure of all schools. She was not formally relieved of her duties like several of her colleagues, but she was not among the few that were chosen to teach online classes. A promotion at this stage did not seem possible because she was not even sure if she still had a job. In tough times, a message of hope is essential.

Amid misery, God provides a message of hope. The prophet, Elisha, said to the king of Israel, “Hear the word of the Lord. This is what the Lord says, ‘About this time tomorrow, a seah of the finest flour will sell for a shekel and two seahs of barley for a shekel at the gate of Samaria’” (2 Kings 7:1, NIV). What a message! In 24 hours, food will be in such abundance that the prices will drop. For such a thing to happen, a miracle must take place, but one of the king’s officers confessed his doubt. He said, “ ... even if the Lord should open the floodgates of the heavens, could this happen?” (2 Kings 7:2, NIV) The king’s officer doubted the message of hope God gave through Elisha.

Sheridan Voysey, a regular contributor to Our Daily Bread devotional, in speaking about his own experiences and that of others said, “Our God is deeply relational, so he loves to speak to us through others.”¹⁹ God can give you a message of hope through a prophet, a pastor, a friend, a neighbor, or whoever God chooses. Above all, the Scriptures are filled with God’s promises. We can receive messages of hope by reading or listening to the Scriptures. The question is, “Will you believe God’s message?”

Francis knows the misery of multiple deaths in his family, but he also knows Jesus’s discourse about heaven in John 14 where he informed us that he prepared a place for us in his Father’s house. Sharonda, who has been listening to countless sermons as she seeks to build her faith, encouraged her friend Hilary not to give up hope on the God who performs miracles. God performs miracles in ways we do not expect.

Four men with leprosy had a conversation. They made up their minds to die but decided it was better to die in search of food than to die by doing nothing. As they approached the Syrian camp, God made their footsteps sound like a great army which made the Syrians flee. This resulted in the miracle as described in the prophet Elisha’s message to the king.

It is nothing short of God’s grace that Francis’s relative is still alive despite his health challenges prior to COVID-19. Moreover, those who died in the Lord will resurrect at his return (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

¹⁹ Sheridan Voysey, 059 Seven Ways God Might Be Speaking To You, para. 10. Retrieved from <https://sheridanvoysey.com/059-seven-ways-god-might-be-speaking-to-you/>

During the pandemic, Hilary got a new higher paying job working three days a week, benefits from her previous job, and close to a million Guyana dollars in building materials for the construction of her house that is progressing well. Sharonda was called out of the blue not only to teach an online class but a higher grade than she had ever taught, yet she is doing an excellent job. She received her promotion.

God's grace on Guyana is evident. It is a miracle that the COVID-19 cases and deaths are not at least double the current numbers. For more than six months, many people have become relaxed in exercising the measures that were implemented to safeguard people from the virus. Churches, including the Baptist community, both virtually and in person, continue to minister to persons facing misery, preaching messages of hope, and witnessing God's miracles.

As you face your difficulties, do you believe the message of hope God gave you? Do you believe that God can do a miracle for you? In his book *The Message of Acts*, theologian John Stott made reference to John Wimber who posited, "... if we have hesitations about ... 'signs and wonders' today, we must make sure that we have not confined both God and ourselves in the prison of Western, rationalistic unbelief."²⁰ God is still performing miracles today, so expect your miracle.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. When faced with crisis, has it been hard for you to be hopeful?
2. When has God worked in miraculous ways in your life and did it impact your faith?
3. How can you pray this week for God to increase your expectancy of his power and to open your eyes to the miracles around you?



About the Author

Winston Garner, Jr., is the Pastor of ML Wilson Baptist Church of the Guyana Missionary Baptist Church and a graduate of the United Theological College of the West Indies and Guyana Bible College. He has been married to Ernella Garner for eleven years, and God has blessed them with three wonderful children.

²⁰ Stott, John R.W., *The Message of Acts: The Bible Speaks Today* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press), p. 100.



Paradigm Shift: Thinking About the Future of the Church in a Post-Pandemic World

Xavier L. Johnson | USA

"It's time to think big about the future of worship before the future passes us by."²¹

This is the argument Joseph W. Walker, III, makes in his article, "Let's Stop Pretending that Virtual Worship Isn't Here to Stay." Walker is the pastor of a thriving megachurch with three locations in Nashville, Tennessee, and the Presiding Bishop of the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship. He knows intimately the challenges that ministries now face in the wake of the coronavirus (COVID-19).

²¹Joseph W. Walker, III, "Let's stop pretending that virtual worship isn't here to stay", <https://religionnews.com/2020/07/24/lets-stop-pretending-that-virtual-worship-isnt-here-to-stay/>, accessed on February 1, 2021.

It is instructive, then, that Walker maintains that many pastors and church leaders are asking the wrong questions when it comes to what worship will look like in a post-pandemic world. He suggests that, instead of focusing on the logistical concerns involved in congregants returning physically to our buildings and sanctuaries for worship with the hopes of eliminating the need for online offerings, pastors and church leaders should be thinking about a hybrid worship model in which in-person and virtual worship exists simultaneously.²² Walker is arguing for a paradigm shift in the way that pastoral and ministry leaders envision and think about worship. However, Walker's argument could be applied to every aspect of church life. COVID-19 has given us an opportunity to rethink every facet of what we do, how we do it, and why. To paraphrase Walker, it is time to think about the future of the church before the future passes us by.

Church leadership scholar Lovett H. Weems, Jr., seems to agree. He discusses navigating the difficulties of congregational leadership and change in his book *Take the Next Step: Leading Lasting Change in the Church*. Weems argues that deep and permanent change occurs when congregations spend time reflecting on their own unique story and allow change to happen as a natural but guided and intentional evolutionary process.²³ He suggests that churches often struggle to find their place in the new and often shifting "generational, social, cultural, and spiritual landscapes" they face today.²⁴ This was true before the advent of the coronavirus, but in a post-pandemic world, the reality of change will be felt more acutely. Failure to embrace change will prove to be more costly and a greater threat to continued viability and existence for many churches.

***Missing the opportunity to rethink, reimagine, and retool
for 21st century ministry today may mean ineffectiveness, failure,
irrelevance, and closure tomorrow.***

This is why those who are charged with the task of congregational leadership and the ministry of institutional stewardship must seize this moment to think deeply about the future of the church in a post-pandemic world. COVID-19 has taught us that there is a myriad of possible futures. Our task is to discern God's "preferred future" for the church and hasten toward it.²⁵ The work of discerning God's vision for the church in a post-pandemic world should be

²² Ibid.

²³ Weems, Jr., Lovett H., *Take the Next Step: Leading Lasting Change in the Church* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2003), 18-19.

²⁴ Ibid, 12.

²⁵ Weems, 16.

seen as theological work because change is inherently theological.²⁶ Paradigm shifts in the life of a worshipping community are not about changing for the sake of change. Rather, change should happen in the life of the church because it is trying to better situate itself theologically, spiritually, and institutionally to live into the future that God has for it.²⁷

Change is a necessary and important work that must be done if the church is to remain a relevant witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in their communities.²⁸ This is Walker's point about embracing a hybrid worship model. Walker asserts that churches that refuse to adopt a "both/and" approach to worship run the risk of becoming obsolete as worshipers continue to look for and expect virtual opportunities to engage their faith communities. While Walker's assertion about hybridity and worship models may have some contextual limitations, the thinking he employs to get there is sound and can be applied to other areas of church life. Though concerns about technology, platforms, and worship formats are important in some contexts, in a post-pandemic world there are other components of institutional life that are of wider concern.

For example, the pandemic has revealed that many of the administrative functions of the church can be done remotely. This means that in a post-pandemic world many churches may need to reconsider their organizational infrastructure and staffing needs. Additionally, consider the fact that many churches have had to think through new and different ways to "be the church" as they were unable to engage in ministry work like pastoral care in the ways they did before the onset of the pandemic. Future models of pastoral care may now need to include virtual counseling sessions, much like telemedicine appointments offered by medical doctors and other practitioners in helping professions.

These are only a few of the areas of church life that may be forever changed in a post-pandemic world. Pastoral and church leaders must create a process in which they can think through and assess all aspects of church life in community with other congregational leaders and stakeholders. This process should be an ongoing and generative process that evaluates and re-evaluates church programming, policies, and procedures for their effectiveness, efficiency, and fidelity to the vision and mission of their ministry contexts.

This discernment process is as important, if not more so, as the processes that we use to think through worship planning, budgeting and finance, and

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid, 15.

²⁸ Ibid, 19.

Christian education and discipleship. Re-assessing programming, policies, and procedures today will better position churches to be relevant, thriving faith communities in a post-pandemic world tomorrow.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What does your congregation do now that it did not do before the pandemic and why?
2. What are some things that your congregation did before the pandemic that it no longer does and why?
3. What are some challenges your congregation has faced during the pandemic?
4. What challenges might your congregation face in a post-pandemic world?
5. What programming, policy, or procedural changes will your congregation need to overcome those challenges?



About the Author

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Reimagining Ritual: Compassion During a Time of Crisis

Jamie F. Eaddy | USA

In the wake of a global pandemic, nearly half a million people in the United States and close to 2.5 million people have died globally. Well beyond what anyone could have imagined, this pandemic has presented unique health and social challenges for all of us. This has certainly been the experience for those of African descent living in the United States.²⁹ Facing illness alone during a global health pandemic and social upheaval is both complex and challenging.

As caregivers, those responsible for providing some form of spiritual, psychological, emotional, physical, and medical care for others, this year has been plagued by trauma, grief, and loss. Additionally, contending with fears

²⁹ A disturbing trend is evident in the U.S.: People of color, particularly African Americans, are experiencing more serious illness and death due to COVID-19 than white people. Coronavirus in African Americans and Other People of Color | Johns Hopkins Medicine

around personal, familial, and community safety due to a lack of personal protective equipment or managing moral injury when the "right thing to do" feels incredibly inhumane eventually takes its toll. Further, expanding our imaginations in a way that allows us to sit with people as they find the language and create meaningful rituals that address the compounded trauma and grief that have made it difficult to breathe, feel, mourn and heal, at times, feels like an impossibility.

A year into the pandemic, even those who have not lost loved ones to COVID-19 feel the effects of isolation and stress. Alongside the health and social challenges presented during this crisis, people of faith are also attempting to navigate their way through a spiritual or religious crisis. During times of challenge, many turn to their communities of faith for guidance and support. This may be especially true for grief, loss, and death. Death is looming in the social and religious consciousness at a time when we have been forced to deal with our loved one's death alone or from a distance. During this pandemic, every death is a COVID-19 death, and many deaths have taken place with no family at the bedside.

Death and distance are two things that one might consider antithetical to the culturally-oriented reactions and death practices to which many are accustomed. At this seemingly impossible intersection, I sit as a Spiritual Care Practitioner. As an ordained minister serving in the role of Chaplain at a Level One Trauma Center, I have witnessed the devastating effects of COVID-19 on families. I have conducted virtual visits with families unable to be present while "Big Mama" is in the ICU. I have held the hand of mothers who have experienced a fetal demise alone. I have stood at the door of the trauma bay as the medical staff attempted to resuscitate men as their families stood outside the hospital doors because protocol did not allow them inside.

Rather than forcing situations that may be unsafe for the sake of tradition, churches will need to find creative ways to engage in ritual and meaning-making.

People of faith embrace gathering with their community of faith as an essential part of life. These gatherings include everything from worship services to funerals. We gather for fellowship and for participating collectively in rituals that provide meaning for our lives. As the world struggles to gain some normalcy, the church is coming to terms with the fact that many of the rituals to which we were accustomed can no longer

be practiced – at least not safely. Rather than forcing situations that may be unsafe for the sake of tradition, churches will need to find creative ways to engage in ritual and meaning-making. This will likely require training for many churches. It will also require introspection. Are we willing to do things

differently or will we remain boxed into traditions that do not provide the healing necessary to help us through this crisis? Without the proper resources in place, the next pandemic we must face will be unresolved grief.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Individual's and communities' ability to cope with loss varies. Social and cultural factors impact that ability. For many, the compounded grief experienced during this time will require care beyond prayer and Scripture. What are some steps your congregation has taken to be equipped to provide grief support today and in the future?
2. Funerals help people find a kind of "closure" needed during the grieving and mourning process. How can our imagination help us reimagine death and dying rituals that allow for mourning?
3. Pastors and leaders are experiencing significant burnout during this pandemic as they are experiencing the same loss as their congregations. What steps have you taken as a leader to address your own grief?
4. Scripture is replete with characters who provide stories of grief and mourning that can be used in exploring how people respond to loss which might prove helpful when the congregation gathers for worship. How do you imagine mining the text to normalize grief within your congregation?



About the Author

Rev. Jamie Eaddy, D.Min. is a Practical Theologian and the Founder of Thoughtful Transitions, an organization that helps people navigate trauma, grief, and loss. Committed to normalizing conversations around faith, spirituality, and mental and emotional health, Dr. Eaddy serves the community as a Chaplain, Adjunct Professor, and Death Doula.



Theology in Times of Crisis

Luiz Sayão | Brazil

In the face of the pandemic that ravages the world today, difficult questions arise. Is it a diabolical action? Does the virus have an evil origin? Perhaps it is only the work of man, as most people think. For others, however, it seems to be "mere chance." I believe that none of these answers can explain the pandemic that is devastating the planet. In this scenario, it is worth consulting biblical wisdom. I am sure that we will learn a lot from the ancient biblical prophets.

Among the prophets of Israel and Judah is the short book of Nahum. At the opening of his prophecy (1:3, KJV), we read the text: "His way is in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet." These words have echoed since the divine judgment that fell on Nineveh in the 7th century B.C., and they speak to us in a particular way in these difficult days of crisis.

Not everyone realizes that the perspective of the prophets of Israel contrasts with the vision of contemporary, secularized, humanistic man. The antiquity of biblical times, like any time in history, was accustomed to catastrophes of all kinds, including plagues and natural disasters. In this unpredictable context, biblical revelation was distinct from the naturalistic worldview of the paganism of the ancient Fertile Crescent. In the paganism of Canaan, nature was divinized. In biblical Israel, the Eternal dominates all and transcends the world. Despite this contrast, in biblical times no one imagined that the world was under human power and that things should follow the course expected by reason that "understands the laws of the universe," capable of mastering it. This anthropocentric focus appears in recent rationalism and enlightenment. The ancients would feel more comfortable with some ideas of recent thinkers like Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and even Sartre. They would understand the tremendous limitation of human beings, their powerlessness in the face of the strange world around them. Aware of reality, the pagans feared natural disasters, often attributed to specific deities. Baal and Ashtaroth dominated faith in the Canaanite culture. Men imagined themselves at the mercy of the gods who could strike them at any moment.

In this environment, biblical thinking rejected pagan idolatry and emphasized the Eternal as the true and only God. The pagan gods were mere expressions of people's imaginations. Nevertheless, biblical man never attributed the origin of phenomena to non-divine elements. A careful reading of Psalm 29, for example, will reveal the apologetics against Baalism and the emphasis that the LORD is the true God who dominates the storms. One can see that "the voice of the LORD" in Psalm 29 is the thunder that rumbles. In general, in the Bible, the suffering that strikes us originates from God himself and not from another source. Similarly, in the book of Ruth, the general suffering (famine) and also the specific pain (Naomi's) come from the LORD himself.

*Nature does not
operate independently
of divine action.*

A theistic perspective of reality presents no alternative. It is impossible to imagine that a natural disaster, such as epidemics or earthquakes, does not have to do with God himself. Nature does not operate independently of divine action. The mistaken idea that men can demand from the Creator and that God should be blamed for the pain caused to them marks the revolt of atheists and agnostics who see life "under the sun" in the language of Ecclesiastes. So ultimately, with Scripture, we assert that the sovereign God who is in control of everything is "responsible" for natural disasters because everything comes from God.

If we could talk to the biblical man of ancient Israel, it might not be so difficult to understand his reasoning. He would know, for example, that God had been

responsible in a direct way for meteorological interventions that caused many deaths, as it happened with the flood and the parting of the Red Sea. Moreover, he would also easily understand that God is the one who takes the life of all those who die (Deut. 32:39 - "I put to death and I bring to life"). The LORD gives life and takes it away. On certain occasions, he calls some of his creatures a little before the time they expect. The man who kills is a murderer, for he has no right to take away what he has never granted. But this is not the case with the sovereign God. That is why our grandfathers liked to say that a deceased had been "collected."

Biblical man also used to understand that such divine acts could be a reminder to human beings of their fragility and sinfulness. The reading of the book of Psalms reveals this frequently (see Psalms 30 and 130). The relationship of suffering and sin associated with fragility was common. Biblical literature even created the term '*enosh*' to speak of man as fragile. The term is distinguished from '*ish*' and '*adam*' and defines man in his distinction from the divine.

In Matthew 5:6, Jesus speaks of those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness." When we understand the context, we see that the word *justice* was related to three aspects: legal, moral, and social. The moral sense had to do with conforming to the divine law, not transgressing the Ten Commandments for example. This moral dimension was linked to the legal sphere of society, that is the proper social ethics of Mosaic origin. So Matthew brings five great discourses to remind us of the five books of the Torah, and the Beatitudes are like the words of the Torah spoken on Mount Sinai. Jesus is a kind of new Moses.

Therefore, the legal and moral aspect - this righteousness - is so valuable. However, that justice unfolded into mercy and refuge as well. That is why, unlike the ancient world, the texts of ancient Israel were unique in being concerned with widows, orphans, the poor and needy with a peculiar focus on the justice of God against oppression and wickedness common in the powers of the ancient world, such as Egypt, Babylon, and the Roman world of Jesus's time where 60% of the population were slaves.

So there is a need for justice in the world. A need for justice because of wickedness and oppression. Justice so that the way society is organized will submit to God's commandments. The Torah has 613 commandments. The Ten Commandments summarize the Law, and Jesus will say that to love God above all things and your neighbor as yourself summarizes the essence of all these commandments. From this perspective, what is the great dimension that involves the person who comes to follow Jesus? They live it out in practice.

Jesus speaks of mercy (v.7). The word evokes God's grace. It is acting in a sensitive way with the more fragile. Our world, the society that functions as Rome, is the world of the winners. Anyone who stumbles along the way will be run over and not stand a chance. The ancient Germanic people killed or abandoned their children when they discovered that they might have any problem. Our world works like this! If someone has difficulties in life, society itself abandons these people, blaming them.

Mercy is aligned with God's grace, with God's unconditional love. This is how God sought out Israel. It was to make a covenant, to establish a partnership relationship by his own decision. He emphasizes that the relationship with Israel was not because they were good people. This same God who manifests himself in Christ Jesus with grace seeks us out. And this love of Christ that constrains us is the mark of the way God acts. When a person becomes part of the Kingdom, recognizing his limitation and his sin, he begins to dream of righteousness. This person who is reached by the Kingdom receives God's mercy because he will not be punished as he should be. Mercy is the counterpoint of grace. Grace is receiving what we do not deserve, and mercy is not receiving what we deserve.

When this unconditional love of God reaches us, we are reached by God's mercy and our hearts are changed.

And who are the merciful? They are those who have been treated by God with such love that they now treat other people that way too.

It is the person who knows that the "so-and-so" did wrong, who knows that thinking objectively he does not deserve anything more; however, because God treats him in such a gracious way, this person believes in another chance for the one who is now the target of God's mercy. If we exclude mercy, the world would be destroyed.

There is only a chance for forgiveness, restoration, and rebuilding reality because of God's mercy and love. Therefore, in the time of pain during the pandemic, the Church must show this mercy and not just reinforce apocalyptic speeches. It must "shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5.16, KJV).

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Have you seen theological debate about the character of God arise in your community during this crisis? Did you personally experience any theological wrestling?

2. How has the justice, mercy, and grace of God been evident in your life?
3. How can we practically demonstrate the mercy of God at this challenging time?



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The Church's Response to the World in the New Normal

Samson Aderinto Adedokun | Nigeria

COVID-19, the lockdown, and restrictions have created a “new normal.” The globalization of the pandemic and the countless teachings available online have created discordant understandings of the Church. The Church is not a building, a denomination, a nationalistic enterprise, Judaism extended, the kingdom of God, or a parenthetical plan of God.

So what is the Church? The Church is first a collective of individuals “who name Jesus as their ruler in life and have indicated their desire to follow him publicly.”³⁰ And, second, the coming together of “those who obey the call, worldwide, regardless of nation or culture, called out from the world, the flesh, and the devil, they come to hear from God.”³¹

³⁰ Ron Kallmier and Andy Peck, *Closing the Back Door of the Church* (Surrey: CWR, 2009), 22.

³¹ Kevin J. Conner, *The Church in The New Testament* (Kent, England: Sovereign World International, 1982), 12ff.

The Church is the body of Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23), the family of God, the household of faith, the pillar, the ground of the truth and the temple of God (Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Timothy 3:15; 1 Peter 2:5).

The Challenges Caused by COVID-19

With COVID-19 came a renewal of faith challenges. The world is now more open with unrestricted and unlimited information and uncensored ideas. Life is fast and furious. The World Wide Web (the internet) has changed our lives. This has thrown up changes that need to be identified and responded to by the Church. What are they?

1. The Challenge of Exclusivism, Pluralism, and Inclusivism

The Church is faced with the challenge of retaining the doctrine of exclusivism. In other words, we ask the questions, “Is Jesus the only savior?” and “Is faith in Christ necessary to be saved?” Of course, our response is yes. The world objects to this. The world says Jesus alone cannot be the Savior, and faith in him alone cannot be sufficient. One influential traditional ruler in Nigeria said, “I’m a practicing Muslim. I also go to Church and I’m a traditionalist.”³² He opined that all religions “are one.” Inclusivism says that although Jesus has completed the work necessary to bring us back to God, people can be saved by responding positively to God’s revelation in creation and in aspects of their religions.

The Response of the Church

We must be bold to state and insist there is only one way to God and that is through conscious faith in Jesus Christ. The Church must maintain that the sacrificial death of Jesus is the basis of genuine salvation. Thus, other religions cannot deliver genuine salvation.

2. The Challenge of Materialism

Materialism is a preoccupation with physical things rather than spiritual things (1 Timothy 6:4-10). John Calvin said, “Where riches hold the dominion of the heart, God has lost His authority.”³³

³² Wale Odunsi, “I’m a Christian, Muslim, traditionalist – Ooni of Ife,” *Daily Post - Nigeria News*, 3 February 2021, <https://dailypost.ng/2017/06/23/im-christian-muslim-traditionalist-ooni-ife>.

³³ Steve Scalici, “For the Love of Money: The Dangers of Materialism,” 16 February 2021, <http://www.crosswalk.com/family/finances/for-the-love-of-money-the-dangers-of-materialism-11529457.html>.

Materialism is an attitude that attaches more importance to money and material goods than they deserve. The advent of and wrong teaching on prosperity and success has fueled this.

The Response of the Church

The Church must become truer to giving rather than taking, elevate divine desire over transient goals, and teach biblical truth about prosperity. Churches and leaders must demonstrate Christian contentment and modesty in a world riddled by poverty (Matthew 6:19-20, Philippians 2:1-11, Philippians 4:11-13).

3. The Challenge of Activism

Activism is rising. Christian activism is any Christian attempt to improve society. Many Christians desire a more direct engagement with political processes. Christians and non-Christians are questioning the role and responsibility of the Church in the current world order.

The Response of the Church

We should be salt and light as Jesus taught in Matthew 5:13-16, recognizing that the Church should be positively impacting the world in every way possible. The Church must disciple those who can lead, serve, and importantly, support them for that purpose.

4. The Challenge of Internet and Technology

The internet has changed our world. As of March 31, 2017, there were 3,739,698,500 people on the internet out of a world population of 7,519,028,970. In Africa, there were 353,121,578 people online out of a reported population of 1,246,504,865 people. In Nigeria, of an aggregated 206,139,589 people, 126,078,999 people were internet users as of December 2019. By December 2020, this had become 203,168,355, representing 96.1% of the population.³⁴ The internet is awash with all kinds of tools. It is a prime promoter of all forms of debased morals.

Then, there is also the advent of new technology. These include the use of audiovisuals for worship, dramatic stage lights, multisite church platforms, and numerous other tools.

³⁴ "AFRICA," Internet World Stats, 23 March 2021, <https://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#ng>.

The Response of the Church

If the Church ignores this reality, it will lose the next generation. We must acknowledge that we live in this age, take full advantage of the tools available, and extend the Gospel wherever possible. We must choose and deploy technology correctly. We must remember that “when used right, technology becomes an accelerator of momentum, not a creator of it.” Discernment is the key.

5. The Challenge of Terrorism

Our world is riddled with insecurity. The church faces external aggression from violent and non-violent terrorists. Violent terrorists deploy physical tools and instigate physical assault on the Church. Non-violent terrorists engage the Church through media attacks and wielding of government and political power to subjugate and undermine the Church.

The Response of the Church

The Church must have a multifaceted approach. We must return to true Christianity, repent of our shallowness, and live for Christ faithfully. We must live above anger and the need for revenge. Also, we must identify and train people of proven faith for leadership and governance and then encourage people to support and vote for them. Additionally, we must train those who will defend the faith against all aggressors on all platforms. I believe we have a theological and historical responsibility to do this.

6. The Challenge of Generations

The Church should be concerned about the next generation. They were born into a world advocating for and promoting diversity, evolution of global brands, social media, and a digital world. This generation represents the most materially endowed, technologically saturated, and formally educated generation our world has ever seen. It is a generation that is global, social, visual, and technological, making them the most connected, educated, and sophisticated generation ever. They have never lived in a world without the internet. To them, Google is like the Bible with guaranteed answers.

The Response of the Church

The Church must recognize the changing demography of the world. We must find ways to connect with them, use the tools that they use, and bring

the Gospel to them in relevant ways. The Church must develop a curriculum that is contextual to today's world, applicable to today's citizens, and useful for the future.

7. The Challenge of Leadership

The Church faces a leadership challenge. Leadership appears patterned after the systems of the world. This style involves “lording it over” to become head over others, gain dominion, subdue, and exhibit a tendency toward compulsion or oppression. In effect, leadership in the world is about interest rather than ministry. This type of leadership was disparaged by Jesus in Matthew 20:25-28, Mark 10:42-45, Luke 22:24-27, and John 13:12-17.

The Response of the Church

The Church must return to the biblical pattern for leadership. The biblical pattern is the Jesus style – focused on serving others and concerned for God's kingdom. In the words of R. T. France, “The natural human concern with status and importance is one of the most fundamental instincts that must be unlearned by those who belong to God's kingdom.”³⁵ Church leadership must be distinctly biblical, Christlike, and deliberately taught.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. How can you engage young people to help develop ways for the Church to reach and equip this generation?
2. Technology is here to stay. What can your church do to leverage on it?
3. In the face of liberalism, how is the Church to maintain its biblical position?



About the Author

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³⁵ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary of the New Testament. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 755.



The Great Omission

Roshan Mendis | Sri Lanka

For many of us during our early walk with Christ, the one thing of paramount importance was Scripture. Listening to God's Word, prayer, and Bible study were the activities that perhaps most characterized our newfound faith.

What would your answer have been if you were asked, "What is more important – the Great Commission or the Great Commandment?" Sharing the good news of Jesus or sharing a cup of cold water? Helping someone become a follower of Christ or helping someone gain a better quality of life?

However, sadly, confronted by these two apparently contrasting choices, pressed by time, priorities, and values, oftentimes the fellowship of believers has prioritized one over the other. We shift to one side of the Gospel or the other. This dualistic view of discipleship within church history has been the great divide, putting congregations and believers into one camp or the other. This unfortunately is an unbiblical and artificial fragmentation. It frequently

appears within our churches between evangelism and social action, word and deed, our “mission” departments and our “development” work. In its most basic form, the challenge we face in Christian witness is fragmentation or integration. In the face of a broken and fragmented world, we become fragmented people in fragmented churches.

Very few would argue against acts of compassion or argue that the Gospel doesn’t need words. While we may agonize over the issue of trying to live both, we cannot allow indifference, apathy, or idleness to keep us from getting involved in either. We know the Great Omission is not an option. Like the child who throws stranded starfish back into the ocean, we know we can’t save them all, but we deeply believe that we’ll be able to make a difference for a few.

The reason this is important is that very often in our concentration on the final part of Jesus’s physical life here on earth, we can easily overlook all that he did up until that point. But Jesus’s life – both his teaching and his example – surely has just as much significance to the Gospel as does his death, burial, and resurrection. It is good to ask ourselves: “What was it that Jesus actually said?” When Jesus went from town to town and synagogue to synagogue, what Gospel did he preach?

It is also good to bear in mind and ponder that in the terminology of Jesus, he only referred to the Great Commandment and gave us a commission that we were meant to fulfill as we were going. The command “to go,” as scholars would tell us, in the aorist tense means that disciple-making is as we go about doing what we do. The description of this section as the “Great Commission” is not something Jesus said but has been rendered by the descriptor of his words. As a result, it has caused many believers to see this as the foremost activity that Jesus espoused, instead of the Great Commandment that he stated. This commission is founded upon his lordship and authority over BOTH heaven and earth. A question to ask ourselves is why would that be an important foundation for the commission? Could it not be because his lordship over the earth has also to be proclaimed in our Gospel? That we do not simply make ready disembodied souls for heaven but rather transform them to experience both fullness of life now and usher in the kingdom of God?

As we study the Scriptures and read the Gospel stories of the life of Christ, it is hard to observe this fragmentation. Integral (or holistic) mission is clearly demonstrated as the way of Jesus.

Even in the incarnation, God entered the human struggle in a certain time and specific place to speak and act in ways that modeled how God’s will is done “on earth as it is in heaven.” Jesus of Nazareth embodied the kingdom of God,

translating and communicating God's mission in ways that suited the needs of private and public life in first century Palestine. His self-introduction in Luke 4:18-20 is described as the "year of the Lord's favour." He taught that "God so loved the world that he sent his son." These teachings declare the full spiritual and physical dimension of God's mission and speak of a redeeming and restoring quality for all of life in the world.

There is no clearer way of summarizing Jesus's own approach to mission than when his disciples asked him how to pray. In offering what has come to be known as the Lord's Prayer, we see the very vision of Jesus as integral, beginning with the words that unite all Christians: "Our Father, in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

We can group the mission of Jesus around several key, overlapping activities in his struggle against principalities and powers, his quest for transformation of all creation, and his walking with the disciples, the poor, and the outcasts:

- **Announcing the Good News:** Jesus entered Galilee, and in his inaugural address in his hometown of Nazareth, he announced the good news that the kingdom of God had drawn near (Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:14-15), proclaiming that he was the fulfillment of the prophetic promise. His words and actions that day showed he had come to proclaim good news that was nothing short of "God's year to act!" – generously and abundantly bringing transformation for the poor, release for the oppressed, and sight for the blind – spiritually, materially, and physically.
- **Teaching:** The followers of Jesus called disciples (student/understudy) were taught to live the life of faith under God's rule and direction, learning by example. They lived with him, ate with him, laughed with him, and learned from him. He shared about the mysteries and ways of the kingdom of God, primarily in parables that integrated spiritual truth with the everyday life of the farmer, housewife, landowner, and ruler. His approach was unique and challenging. It remains the model for training Christian leaders even today.
- **Healing and Caring for the Sick and Wounded:** Through signs and wonders, Jesus demonstrated principles of the kingdom that were not simply supernatural and spiritual acts, but also had sociological, political, and even economic implications. He challenged the distorted and cruel "purity culture" of his day by healing the man born blind (John 9) and the woman who had the issue of blood (Mark 5). It is clearly seen in Jesus's answer (Luke 7:22) when responding to the question of John the Baptist, "Are you the one who was to come?" Jesus's ministry of healing gave evidence of God's concern for every dimension of human wellbeing.

- ***Eating and Drinking with Sinners:*** Jesus practiced inclusive table fellowship, a countercultural and controversial act in a Mediterranean world where hospitality was strictly determined by social class and religious credentials. He transcended religious, ethnic, and gender prejudices in his memorable conversation with the Samaritan woman in John 4.
- ***Confronting People Who Abused Power and Authority:*** Time and again, Jesus's acts of love and compassion required him to also shelter and defend people from prejudice and danger. It was inevitable that he would come into conflict with those who were the powerbrokers and gatekeepers of institutions that benefited the most from injustice. Jesus impacted the unseen and seen structures and institutions of power in his world. Examples include his defense of the woman caught in adultery (John 8) and his scathing indictment of the religious leaders (Matthew 23). In doing this, his actions and words unmasked the powers and principalities of his day.
- ***Sending Out His Disciples:*** Jesus instructed them to conduct this mission, bringing and proclaiming God's kingdom of peace (shalom) to households and receiving whatever hospitality was offered. As part of the visit, they were to call people to repentance, offer healing and anointing with oil, and conduct exorcisms. Jesus was asking and authorizing his disciples to embody and fulfill the mission that he himself had been modeling for them. It illustrated an integration of purposes, giving witness to the dramatic arrival of the kingdom of God. If received, people would experience deep personal restoration.
- ***The Crucifixion:*** Under Roman law, crucifixion was a penalty for treason. Jesus's death was a result of the backlash from the structural forces of evil in his day. In his execution, the Gospel accounts depict in grim clarity the cooperation between the high priest (who had been appointed by the Roman Emperor) and the local political powers. This does not diminish the theological meaning or divine purpose of Jesus's death as the final sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins and the decisive means through which the world is redeemed.
- ***The Brilliance of Jesus's Resurrection:*** By raising Jesus from the dead, God decisively accomplished an array of purposes. Through Christ, the penalty for sin has been paid, the world redeemed, and the kingdom of God irreversibly established. It is also an endorsement of God's integrated purposes, linking word and action, mercy and justice, spirit and earth. It was a message of holistic transformation. God has put his stamp of approval on the way of Jesus, inaugurating the final chapter of history.

All these spheres of Jesus's ministry are overlapping and mutually reinforcing. Together they represent how integral/holistic mission touches virtually every dimension of human and community life. Jesus showed us what God's kingdom priorities look like at a ground level and provided a necessary model of a broad and comprehensive understanding of what it means to be "saved."

Following Jesus's resurrection and ascension in John 17:18 and John 20:21, Jesus speaks these words to his disciples following his resurrection, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." We must rightly warn against an over-literalist interpretation of this verse for clearly we are not all meant to die on a Roman cross! Yet it would be wrong to deny that they point to Jesus's model of mission as a paradigm for our own. The verse is immediately followed by the gift of the Spirit, and as Carson notes, the perfect tense of sent suggests that Jesus is in an ongoing state of "sentness." Thus, Christ's disciples do not take over Jesus's mission; his mission continues and is effective in their ministry, birthed with the formation of the early church, and one which continues right now – today – in you and me, your church and mine.

The movement of integral/holistic mission is poised to enter a final crucial chapter. May we embrace this and in response together with Isaiah say, "Here am I Lord, send me."

For Reflection and Discussion

1. How do you balance the Great Commission and the Great Commandment in your own ministry?
2. Which of the spheres of Jesus's ministry listed above are you most comfortable in and which one do you need to challenge yourself to strengthen?



About the Author

With more than 25 years of experience in the field of aid and development, Roshan Mendis is the Director of Asia Pacific Baptist Aid (APBAid). Having served hands-on in grassroots and management environments, Roshan is a sought-after resource person in development practice and a preacher and teacher, particularly in the areas of Integral Mission and Advocacy.



The Power of Last Words

Wati Longchar | India

“Eli, Eli lama sabachthani? My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

These were the last words of Jesus recorded in the Gospel according to Matthew (Matthew 27:46). Even to date, Christians remembering Jesus’s last words continue to be inspired to sacrifice their lives for justice. We want to hear and know the last words of loved ones when they pass away. My dad’s last words were “Take me to the village.” The last words of George Floyd were “I can’t breathe” (the experience of many indigenous people and Dalits for centuries).

One of my friends told me that during the last Nagaland state election, a person decided to ride his motorcycle in an inebriated state after drinking an excessive amount of alcohol. Since he was struggling to keep his balance, his friends told him they would take him home. To their surprise, he threatened them, saying, “Who are you? I will beat you!” Then, he abruptly rode away. Within a few minutes, he returned to his friends and shouted at them again, “Who are you? What do you want to tell me?” Then he left them again. After

riding for a few meters, he lost control of his motorcycle, hit a rock, and in an instant, died on the spot. For him, “Who are you? What do you want to tell me?” were his last words.

Mahatma Gandhi’s last words were, “Hey Ram.” Saddam Hussein’s last words were, “Down with the traitors, the Americans, the spies, and the Persians.” Imagine the last words of a person being murdered or dying. Some of the last words we often hear ... “Oh Jesus” or “Oh my God” ... “I do not want to die now, but I cannot endure the pain anymore. I am going.” ... “Thank you, all of you.” ... “I love you. See you in heaven.” ... “I will miss you forever.” ... “Love each other.” ... “Take care of your mother.” Last words are always remembered!

Rest in Peace

After a person’s passing, the community typically arranges a solemn funeral service after which the coffin is carried to the graveyard for burial, and the procession is led by the pastor, relatives, church members, neighbors, villagers, and friends accompanied with flowers, singing, praying, and consoling of the loved ones. After the last prayer, the body is buried by the community in the grave with much honor and respect. The last rite, though tearful, is the most memorable moment. In silence, the loved ones say, “May their soul rest in eternal peace.”

Leaving the World Without Last Words

It can be painful to leave the world without saying the last word. We can say that the greatest blessing to loved ones is the last words. Many people have died without being able to say their last blessings to their loved ones. 227,898 people were swept away into the ocean by a super tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004. Cyclone Nargis killed 138,373 people in Myanmar in 2007, and 8,964 people were killed in the earthquake that shook Nepal in 2015. Many people have died in air crashes, fires, vehicle accidents, flooding, and mining tragedies all over the world. They struggled alone and died without being able to convey any last words. Millions of people have been killed during countless wars, including the first and second World Wars. The genocide committed against indigenous people and the millions of innocent people killed during the slave trade, conflicts, and wars in Vietnam, the Middle East, Kenya, Congo, Sri Lanka, Nepal, India, Korea, China, Cambodia, Taiwan, and many other countries – all without having the opportunity to say their last word to their loved ones. Many pandemics such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and hunger continue to kill millions of people around the world. During their final moment, they all must have wept desperately like our Lord Jesus Christ, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

COVID-19 Denies the Last Words

COVID-19 has killed thousands of people, not allowing the victims to impart their last words to their loved ones. At the time of writing this article, 2,403,253 (February 2021) people have died across the globe due to the coronavirus. Many of the deceased left the world without saying their last words to their loved ones. They were kept in an isolation ward. Loved ones were not allowed to come near. Friends, neighbors, church members, and relatives were not allowed to attend the funeral service. All the deceased must have left the world without saying their last words to their loved ones. Some dead bodies laid unclaimed for days in the hospital, on the railway platforms, and in public places. We have also seen the poor carrying the dead in cycle rickshaws due to the non-availability of ambulance services.

The dead bodies covered in black plastic bags dumped in trucks and thrown into deep pits and other places. Dead bodies buried in lanes without name tags. While some were buried in mass graves, others were not allowed to be buried in public cemeteries for fear that the virus would spread even through the soil. Those family members and people who helped in burying the dead bodies were discriminated against and isolated. Numerous people have died and will continue to die as thousands are in sickbeds unbeknownst of their future. Countless family members, church members, and friends have no words except to watch silently from a distance.

Indeed, it is one of the darkest hours that humanity is facing in history. People who died of COVID-19 must have cried alone, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” When they were dying, family members and friends could not be with them, but God was there. Those Palestinians chased from home for the past 70 years, the Syrians in refugee camps, the Yemenis and Kurds displaced from their villages, and many stranded migrant workers in different cities are all pleading: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” God is the only hope.

COVID-19 is a reminder to the world that the desire for accumulation of more wealth, weapons, technologies, and power alone cannot protect life. COVID-19 challenges us to invest our resources in sustainable food security programs, health systems, and organic farming. Importantly, we are reminded that God’s land, river, ocean, mountain, trees, and all living beings must be protected and preserved. A community cannot be protected by weapons, but only by love and care, solidarity, helping hands, and most importantly, we must let justice roll like the living water in our society. Otherwise, we will cry, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”

COVID-19 gives us an opportunity to review our life in silence and a time to repent of our sins that destroy lives. Let us choose life, protect the precious, give of body, but not destruction.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What do you hope your last words will be?
2. How can the church help families who have not been able to hear their loved one's last words?
3. How has the pandemic changed funerals in your community?
4. How are you choosing life today?



About the Author

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The Priesthood of All Believers

Lisa M. Weaver | USA

Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— If indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:1-5)

“Believe the Christian faith is best understood and experienced within the community of God’s people called to be priests to one another, as these Scriptures are read and studied together ... ”

*Belief Statement, Baptist World Alliance Centenary Congress
Birmingham, United Kingdom, July 2005*

The coronavirus pandemic has changed the way people around the world accomplish ordinary tasks, work, and live as well as changes in the ways that churches have had to do things. However, the challenge with churches has historically been this: churches are often slow to change because “it is not the way we have always done it.” Pandemics are not contexts of convenience. We do not have the luxury of holding on to our preferences and comforts because people are dying and ministry still needs to happen, perhaps now more than ever. So we have to be adaptive and creative in developing and leaning into different and creative ways to “serve this present age” while continuing to meet the spiritual needs of the church.

However, change often requires teaching, and crisis change requires teaching that is efficient yet sufficient to shift people and congregations into new modalities of life and ministry. The coronavirus pandemic (along with the other pandemics that are happening around the world) is an opportunity for Baptist churches to re-examine the ways in which they understand and live out the priesthood of all believers in order to discover how churches can continue to do ministry in these challenging times.

The Priesthood of All Believers

Baptists hold to the theological tenant, expressed in the second epistle of Peter, of the “priesthood of all believers.” As a result of a believer’s trinitarian baptism by immersion, a person not only becomes a member of the body of Christ (the body of Christ’s believers and followers in the world) but also one who shares in Christ’s priesthood. The fifth article of the Baptist World Alliance Belief Statement reads that the baptized are “God’s people called to be priests to one another.” Part of the challenge that the pandemic presents for the church is moving people from their “identity as Christians” to their “works as Christians.” In other words, prior to the pandemic, in some Christian contexts, believers heavily relied on their pastors and clergypersons to “do the works of faith and the church” for them.

Believers (both clergy and laypeople) came to church with the erroneous understanding that the clergy and the music ministry “do” worship, and they come to church “for” worship (and not necessarily “to” worship). There is a belief that it is the people “up front” who participate in worship when, in fact, it is the entire congregation who is called to participate in worship. When believers want prayer, they often call the church for the pastor to pray for them or to tell the pastor who needs prayer. Pastors and clergy cannot hold the laity completely responsible for these attitudes. Pastors and clergy reinforce these beliefs and behaviors for a myriad of reasons beyond the scope of this reflection to address.

The point is that the pandemic has challenged the church to lean into the works of Christ in and beyond the congregation and to reexamine its theology, practices, and beliefs (perhaps especially around ordination) in light of their understanding of the priesthood of all believers. Although the term “priesthood” is more common parlance among our Christian siblings in episcopal traditions (Roman Catholic, Anglican, Episcopalian, Orthodox), it is certainly part of Baptist theological vocabulary and parlance as it is found in the Bible. However, we do not teach or emphasize enough what participation in the baptismal priesthood means. Therefore, it is worthy of attention here, albeit brief.

The Baptismal Priesthood and the Ordained Priesthood

Baptists have traditionally held firm boundaries between what ordained people can “do” and what laity can “do.” There is historical and theological necessity, understanding, and significance to this. One of the earliest New Testament accounts that provides an understanding of responsibilities that come as a result of “ordination” can be found in Acts 6:1-7 with the “setting apart” of Stephen and six other men by “the laying on of hands and prayer.” The challenge that the pandemic has presented the church with is the need to be clearer about the distinctions between what ordained people “do” and what laity can “do.” One of the places this has emerged for Baptists during this pandemic is around the Lord’s Supper. Understandings about who can do what regarding the elements (preparation and distribution) and prayer (who says it) are reflected in the various ways in which congregations have handled the Lord’s Supper during this time.

In some communities, pastors lead the Lord’s Supper liturgy (either at home or in the sanctuary) as congregants follow along via Zoom (or some other virtual platform) and receive elements they have prepared in their homes. In other communities, congregants are encouraged to observe the Lord’s Supper on their own until they can gather again as a community. There should be no judgment regarding either of these practices. Rather, what the differences in practice highlight are differences in the understanding of the dimensions of authority that ordination invests in a person (who has the authority to handle the elements, who has the authority to pray over the elements) and the function of the Words of Institution and the prayer over the elements (why are they recited and who gets to say them). The pandemic has provided an opportune time for deeply and critically re-examining the theological beliefs held around liturgical matters like these.

How pastors and congregants understand the priesthood of believers and the distinctions between the ministry of the baptismal priesthood and the (specific) works of the ordained priesthood inform how communities are

handling this ordinance. The pandemic has invited the church to consider what constitutes the ministry of the whole people of God (the baptized priesthood of all believers) and not what categories of people can do what. For when we understand the baptismal priesthood as the people who perform Christ's ministry in the Church and the world rather than people who hold a specific office and/or title that grants them the opportunity to do the "special things" as the laity watch like spectators, it is then that the people of God – the whole people of God – understand the broadness of their divine authority as "priests of God through Jesus Christ."

What Was Christ's Ministry?

In His inaugural sermon in Luke 4:18, Jesus quotes Isaiah in stating the purpose of His ministry.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

In His earthly ministry, Jesus did all of these things. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, challenged the false and oppressive rules of the Roman empire, and called religious leaders to truth and accountability for their misinterpretation and misapplication of the law and the abuses of their offices and authority. This was Jesus's ministry. As baptized believers, we are called to participate in these same works of ministry as part of the baptismal priesthood. Laity does not need an ordained person to always make and execute a plan. It is in the purview of the ministry of the baptismal priesthood to fight for equality and justice for all humanity and to advocate for those who are marginalized and lack agency and access to those things which are human rights (e.g., food, clean water, safe shelter).

Too often we make false distinctions between our work in the Church and our work outside the Church because we do not robustly understand our responsibility for participation in the baptismal priesthood of believers.

Believers as Intercessors and Advocates

Sacred Scripture shows Jesus Christ to be believers' intercessor and advocate. The implication of Christ's work in the life of the believer is this: believers have the responsibility of interceding and advocating on behalf of others. Now we cannot save anyone, but we are exhorted to intercede and advocate on behalf of others in alignment with Jesus's ministry to the poor, the marginalized, the

disenfranchised, the sick, the hungry, the widows, and orphans, and the children. The pandemic has exponentially increased the oppression and need of humanity worldwide.

Additionally, the pandemic has exponentially exposed the greed and evil that are the root cause of the oppression and need that many are experiencing globally. COVID-19 is not the only pandemic that this past year has magnified. Unemployment and hunger have reached record levels as a result of the pandemic. The deep roots of white supremacy have been brought to the fore again, in the brutal, unjustified police killings of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmed Arbury, Rayshard Brooks, Elijah McClain, and scores of other black women and men. Healthcare disparities between blacks and whites in the United States were brought to the fore, again, with the death of Dr. Susan Moore. Dr. Moore's death brought attention to the intersectional nature of oppression that black women experience in American society.⁵

Recently, there has been a rise again in attacks against elderly Asian Americans, another horrific demonstration of xenophobia and racism against other human beings who are created in the *imago dei*. The climate crisis is advancing in ways that threaten human flourishing and survival unless it is given greater attention soon. Believers are not only exhorted to pray for these groups of people and about these global circumstances. Believers are also called to respond to them, doing works of ministry to alleviate suffering, meet needs, and restore creation. Believers are called to participate in Jesus's ministry in the Church and the world.

Conclusion

Ministry during multiple pandemics has not been easy. As difficult as life has been as a result of the multiple, converging pandemics, we see that God has also equipped the Church to continue works of ministry. By virtue of their baptism, believers participate in the ministry of Jesus to the Church and the world. We understand that the ministry of the baptismal priesthood belongs to the entire body of Christ and that there are specific tasks of ministry that are the purview of the ordained clergy. So when we understand and lean into ministry as part of the priesthood of believers, we understand that the ministry of worship and prayer and Bible study as well as the work of meeting the needs of the poor, hungry, unhoused, and in all other ways marginalized is all of ours to do – not just the pastors and leaders of our churches.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. During this pandemic, how has your church re-examined the ways in which you understand and live out the priesthood of all believers?
2. In what ways has your understanding of the roles for clergy and laity changed during the pandemic?
3. What are some examples of how you have interceded and advocated for others during the pandemic?



About the Author

Rev. Dr. Lisa M. Weaver is assistant professor of worship at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. She also serves on the worship grants advisory board for Calvin Institute of Christian Worship. Dr. Weaver served as a theological consultant for One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism: An African American Ecumenical Hymnal and has three essays in Singing Our Savior's Story: A Congregational Song Supplement for the Christian Year, Hymn Texts.



Theology of Discipleship: Jesus's Discipleship Model of Suffering and Sacrifice

Israel Olofinjana | Nigeria

How do we do discipleship in a suffering world and what can we learn from Majority World Christians about discipleship models rooted in suffering?

Any meaningful discussion on discipleship must start with the understanding of the lordship of Christ. It is within this context we can talk about following Jesus in obedience, dedicating our lives to God's kingdom. The lordship of Jesus as the Messiah who came to inaugurate God's kingdom on earth is the central theme of the New Testament. Jesus's announcement of the kingdom of God was a radical message in that a worldly king and kingdom in his day was displayed through pomp and pageantry, but the kingdom Jesus introduced was defined by love, submission, humility, and peace. This was because Jesus emptied himself, or more accurately did not cling or hold on to power

(Philippians 2:5-7). This is known as *kenosis* (the Greek word for emptying oneself), a theological concept that describes the humility and liminality of Jesus's life, mission, and ministry. This is why Jesus taught that those who want to be great or to lead must become a servant in order to lead effectively (Mark 10:34-45). The implication is that in order for us to incarnate Jesus's way of doing mission, we must first empty ourselves or renounce any worldly notion of power or ambition. This is true to the New Testament notion of leadership or greatness, which can only be accomplished by humility, submission, and servanthood.

The implication of this is that if our discipleship programs and events do not prepare people to understand the idea of suffering and sacrifice, it will mean they will only follow Jesus temporarily. People will follow Jesus when all is going well, and then will walk out on God when things get tough.

Another implication is that we follow Jesus as the only lifestyle and not as an optional lifestyle. We do not follow only when it is convenient and comfortable. We must put every part of us – mind, will, and emotions – and all aspects of our lives (job, family, education, hobbies, and finances) before God to use as he pleases and whenever he calls us. After Jesus gave some serious teaching about what it means to believe and follow him, many of the Jews left him. But then he asked the disciples one important question: “Do you also wish to go away?” (John 6:67). Peter's answer to that question is very important for our discipleship today because it demonstrates loyalty and obedience to the lordship of Christ. “Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.’” (John 6:68). Peter's answer is conditioned on the understanding that following Jesus even when it is rough and difficult is not an optional lifestyle but rather that his own survival depends on it. This changes the narrative when we see discipleship not as some form of alternative lifestyle but the source of our survival.

Jesus's notion of suffering and sacrifice as an essential element in following him has been demonstrated through the history of the church. Eusebius, the church historian, chronicles the sufferings and martyrdom of the early disciples and how the church expanded through persecution in its first three hundred years.³⁶ Many of the early disciples of Jesus suffered in different ways and ultimately sacrificed their lives in following God's call to incarnate his kingdom. Martyrdom, that is, the idea of dying for the cause of Christ was a major theme in early and patristic Christianity. It also became a vehicle for advancing God's kingdom so that Tertullian (c. AD 150- 225), an African

³⁶ Andrew Louth (ed), Eusebius: *The History of the Church*, G.A.Williamson Trans.(Middlesex, England: Penguin Book, 1965).

church father and theologian, could say, "... the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."³⁷ In essence, martyrdom and mission went hand in hand.

In the context of COVID-19, the characteristics we see presented are uncertainty, despair, suffering, pain, grief, trauma, loss, and isolation. It is then the followers of Jesus who have been prepared through suffering and sacrifice are best placed at this time to reach out to people and help them follow Jesus faithfully. The idea of suffering and sacrifice is very much the reality that Majority World Christians, who are refugees, asylum-seekers, and economic migrants have suffered (and continue to suffer). This will be very different from what white, middle-class Western Christians face. This is not to say that white people do not suffer. That is far from the case. The point I am making is that people do indeed suffer in various ways and forms.

I am also not advocating or suggesting that Africans, Asians, or Latin Americans have a monopoly on pain and trauma. An example of a European who suffered is German theologian Jurgen Moltmann.³⁸ Moltmann's theology about the suffering of a God that suffers through Jesus in a suffering world is a very powerful reflection needed for this period. So what I am suggesting is that some Majority World (Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean) history demonstrates that certain regions of the world have suffered from systemic and institutional injustices like the slave-trade, indentured servitude, imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, therefore making Majority World Christians typically more accustomed to suffering and pain.

Some of the Majority World theologies originate in the context of loss and pain. An example is liberation theology, which developed in the socio-economic poverty context of Latin America as the Catholic Church responded by identifying with the poor and the marginalized.³⁹ In the African context, black theology emerged in southern Africa to challenge the systemic injustice caused by the apartheid regime. African political theology that developed elsewhere on the continent also has something to offer in terms of the theology of lament. A prime example is the work of the Roman Catholic Ugandan theologian Emmanuel Katongole who speaks of the evil and trauma of the recent conflict in Congo and the need to know how to lament.⁴⁰

³⁷ John Foxe and M Hobart Seymour, *The Acts and Monuments of the Church: Containing the History and Sufferings of the Martyrs, Part 1* (London, Charter House, 1838), p.44.

³⁸ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London, SCM Press, 1974).

³⁹ See as an example, Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (London, SCM Press, 1974).

⁴⁰ Emmanuel Katongole, *Born from Lament: The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2017). See also Cathy Ross, Lament and Hope: <https://churchmissionsociety.org/resources/lament-and-hope-cathy-ross-anvil-vol-34-issue-1/> (Accessed 6th May 2020).

If there is one thing common to these theologies, it is that they take the suffering of the poor and the oppressed as their hermeneutical lens. Their understanding of discipleship is therefore rooted in Jesus's humility and sacrifice and how that shaped his ministry praxis. The implication of this is that these theologies emphasize that following Jesus entails suffering and loss, and that mission is to respond in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed. Majority World Christians who have relocated to Europe or North America through various migratory factors come with this notion and experience of discipleship. Diaspora Christians therefore understand from firsthand experience that whole-life discipleship entails different kinds of suffering and demands sacrifice.

Thus, if the church is going to do discipleship and mission well in this coronavirus climate, we need to grasp Jesus's understanding of suffering and sacrifice as a way of life.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What connection do you see between discipleship and suffering?
2. What do you think "whole-life discipleship" means and how can you practice it personally? How can it be taught or modeled in the life of your church / community?
3. How has suffering and sacrifice been formative in your spiritual life over the last year?



About the Author

Israel Oluwole Olofinjana is the new Director of the One People Commission of the Evangelical Alliance. He is an ordained and accredited Baptist minister and has led two multi-ethnic Baptist churches and an independent charismatic church. He is the founding director of Centre for Missionaries from the Majority World, a mission network initiative that provides cross-cultural training to reverse missionaries in Britain. Israel is an Honorary Research Fellow at Queens Foundation for Theological Ecumenical Education in Birmingham and on the Advisory Group on Race and Theology of Society for the Study of Theology (SST). He is a consultant to the Executive Team of Lausanne Europe advising them on matters related to diaspora ministries in Europe. He is on the Christian Aid Working Group of Black Majority Church Leaders exploring the intersection of climate justice and racial justice.



Three Groanings

Jonathan R. Wilson | Canada

For many months now, the entire world has been listening to the groaning caused by COVID-19. Those who have died, those who have lost loved ones, those who have suffered and recovered, those who have lost their livelihood, those who have starved, those whose mental and emotional health has broken – the list is almost endless, isn't it?

In this groaning, we have seen clearly and powerfully the fragility of life in this world and the unjust realities that cause suffering to fall disproportionately on the poor and marginalized. We must never forget this revelation even as we look forward to a vaccine. And we must remember that what COVID-19 has revealed is a reality that has been with us since Genesis 3. The brokenness of this world causes groaning even when there is no worldwide pandemic that changes the circumstances of our deaths and hastens its arrival.

In Romans 8:18-27, Paul sets three groanings – not just one – within the story of God's redemption of all creation. These three groanings give voice to the suffering of all creation and teach us even more about the good news for the

COVID-19 world. But before we consider those groanings, we need the story that Paul tells in the entire chapter.

If someone told me they were going to erase all of Scripture from my memory except for one chapter, I would choose to “remember” Romans 8. It’s a wonderful, pivotal chapter in Paul’s letter. Paul begins by declaring the freedom that is offered to us by “the law of the Spirit of life” made actual in Jesus Christ and ends by assuring us of God’s unshakeable, inescapable love for us – even in the midst of the suffering of creation and our bodies – by assuring us that this Spirit of life is with us.

In between these two great truths is the story of “the law of the Spirit who gives life” through the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. Paul describes this life in *pneuma* (the Greek word often used to refer to the Holy Spirit) in opposition to “life” in *sarx*. The word *sarx* can be used for our flesh – the stuff that makes up our bodies that we can gather up under our fingers and pinch. But Paul more often uses *sarx* to refer to a power in opposition to *pneuma*, the Spirit. When Paul uses *sarx* this way, he does not mean that our bodies are set against the Spirit. After all, when we live in accordance with the Spirit, we do so in our bodies.

Rather, when Paul uses *sarx* in opposition to *pneuma*, he is contrasting the way of death (*sarx*, see Romans 8:6,13) with the way of life (*pneuma*). *Sarx* is a way of looking at the world and acting in the world as if death is the ultimate power and final word. “Life” in the realm of *sarx* is really death. This is the kingdom of death in mortal combat with the kingdom of life and peace (Romans 8:6). If we fall into fear of death and act out of that fear because of COVID-19, we have become captive to *sarx*.

This does not mean that we should reject wise medical guidance or refuse a vaccine. It means that we should accept the wisdom that God has given humans who study and treat viruses, but we must not live in fear. Out of love for neighbors and in witness to the Gospel of life, we must do all we can to prevent the spread of the virus and to care for those who are sick or dying of COVID-19.

In Jesus Christ, life and peace are revealed to be triumphant over sin and death through his sacrificial love.

***However, the triumph of life over death
does not free us from suffering in this world.***

The battle has been won, the enemy defeated, but death is the last enemy to be destroyed when the risen Christ comes again (1 Corinthians 15:26).

As we wait for Christ to come again, we live by the Spirit in a world where death is still a reality, even if we know it isn't the final reality. As we live in this world, we hear the continuing presence of death in three groanings (Romans 8:18-27). In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we once again hear loudly and clearly these groanings.

The first groaning is the groaning of creation (Romans 8:22). In the pandemic, we hear this groaning as creation becomes a place of death, not life. Creation groans because viruses and pandemics are alien to creation. In the same way that we groan when something not right (bacteria, viruses) enters our bodies, creation groans as death intrudes on that which God creates for life.

The second groaning is the groaning of our bodies (Romans 8:23). Many of us have known the groaning of our bodies before this pandemic took hold in our world. But the suffering of COVID-19 patients with fever, loss of breath, pain, and in many cases the hastening of death, makes the groaning of our bodies more acute and increases our grief in the face of death. How can we mourn the millions who have died and millions more who have suffered?

The third groaning is the groaning of the Spirit (Romans 8:26). Here Paul makes clear what life in *pneuma* means for our everyday realities. Here Paul makes clear that the suffering of creation and our bodies are not signs of the Spirit's absence or lack of power. Instead, Paul declares that the Spirit is with us in our suffering just as Jesus Christ is "Emmanuel" – God with us.

Now, knowing that the Spirit is with us, we may return to something I did not note in the earlier verses (Romans 8:22-23). Re-reading these verses, we may rejoice in hope. The groaning of the creation is "groaning as in the pains of childbirth" (Rom. 8:32). Something new is being born! By the work of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, New Creation is coming into this world.

The groaning of our bodies (Romans 8:23) is a sign of eagerness for "our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies." We know that our future is sure in Christ by the presence of the Spirit (Romans 8:14-17).

We who believe the Gospel know that God's creation is a place of life and peace, not death. We acutely feel the presence of suffering and death in this world, especially as COVID-19 has made these realities so clear and present. But because we also know that new life has come in Jesus and new creation is at work by the power of the Spirit, we live with hope.

We can't see the final reality of the world except in hope: a sure and certain knowledge that this is God's creation meant for LIFE (Romans 8:24).

In the midst of the suffering and death worked by COVID-19, we may find it difficult to hope. Our bodies get weary, and our emotions are exhausted. But we must not lose hope. We know why death is at work in the realm of *sarx*.

And we know that life is at work in the realm of *pneuma*. And if we belong to Christ, then we live in *pneuma*.

Paul assures us of this unshakeable, everlasting reality in the final verses of this wonderful chapter:

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
(Romans 8:35-39)

So my sisters and brothers who have been set free from “the law of sin and death” (Romans 8:2):

- Even as we hear creation groan under the load of suffering and death caused by COVID-19 ...
- Even as our bodies and those of family, friends, and neighbors around the world groan in the midst of this pandemic ...

May we be people who do not fear death but live in hope, witness to the good news of new creation, and serve others because we know of everlasting life in the Spirit, who is with us in our sufferings and is the guarantee of our inheritance. That inheritance is a new creation in which God will wipe every tear from our eyes and where there is “no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 1:4).

This is the reality of life in *pneuma* in which we already walk today, even in the midst of our groanings.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What strikes you about the relationship between *pneuma* and *sarx*?
2. Which of the three groanings has impacted you the most this year?
3. How do you think the choice to live with hope might impact your Gospel witness?



About the Author

Jonathan Wilson was raised in the southern United States but has lived most of his adult life in Canada. He has served Christ for over 45 years as a business manager, pastor, professor, and now as a theological consultant for Canadian Baptist Ministries, which has enabled him to learn from God's people on five continents.



Unstoppable: COVID-19 and the Church

Wati Longchar | India

CCOVID-19 continues to be an unstoppable pandemic with the capacity of locking down the whole world, causing many deaths and infecting millions of people. The virus is going to be endemic; it will stay with us. Concerning the discovery of a vaccine, the World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said, “It won’t end the COVID-19 pandemic on its own, and there’s no guarantee that scientists will find one.”

Many experts have expressed similar opinions that the vaccines are “no guarantee for permanent eradication.”

The WHO Director-General further said, “We will not – we cannot go back to the way things were.” We just have to adopt a new normal way of life.

Social media is full of ‘Gospel’ messages. We have heard many videos saying that COVID-19 is a warning sign of the end times, the signs of divine wrath, or the consequences of violations of natural laws. Some say that it is the end times, the fulfillment of 666, and China is branded as anti-Christ/Christian because of their anti-Christian attitude and activities. Some see it as God’s punishment for sinful people.

***Instead of discerning God’s love amidst suffering, many preachers
have over-emphasized an angry God.***

This is nothing but a prosperity theology. When we measure God’s works only from an “abundant blessings” and a “miraculous cure” perspective, then it is prosperity theology. In other words, such people can be termed as the worshipers of mammon (money and wealth). Some even prophesied that Israel will be the only country that will not be affected by COVID-19. (It was also affected by the pandemic.) For me, it is not a curse/divine punishment, but a blessing. It makes us realize our mistakes and open up new opportunities to work for God’s kingdom.

COVID-19 is challenging us to go out from the four walls of the church. We have been so satisfied with our normal get-together worship services, but worship services have now been locked down for months. COVID-19 is demanding a new Christian ministry in action. It is like telling us, “Come out from the church and go to homes, marketplaces, and preach there!” We are being reminded that the Church was started at home. God is there where one or two are gathered in God’s name. The Church is the people and not the magnificent building. The Church is also not a few older men making decisions for everybody. All people – men, women, youth, disabled, etc. – are included in Church. The Church becomes vibrant when we build the whole people of God. We need to build an inclusive Church where all are treated justly and equally. Today, it seems that people see only money, fame, and power. Nothing else.

It also seems that the world has lost the value of love, care, and support. It is as though humanity has no place in society. The story of Jyotikumari and her father testify to it. She is just a fifteen-year-old girl, but she dared to take her father home on a bicycle. They were evicted from the room where they lived in Delhi. The father, who had a broken leg, was seated on the carrier of an old bicycle, and she pedaled him to their home village in Bihar. The journey took seven days. The distance covered was around 1,000 miles. The landlord asked them to leave since they could not pay rent during the COVID-19 lockdown. We live in a world where human beings are treated worse than animals. They also passed by many churches, mosques, and temples, but nobody came forward to help. No one offered them shelter.

The COVID-19 pandemic is challenging us to show love and justice in action. It is urging us to go to the homes of drunkards, killers, commercial sex workers, and preach there! Pray there! Sing there! About justice, love, care, and solidarity. It is challenging us to be the hands and feet of Jesus in our everyday worlds.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Some are saying that COVID-19 is a sign of the end times. What are your thoughts on this? What does the Bible say about indicators of the end times?
2. What do you think it means to “discern God’s love amidst suffering” within your community? Do you agree that this should be our priority as people of faith? If so, what are practical ways to do so?
3. Jyotikumari’s story is heartbreaking – evicted from home, cycling 1,000 miles, carrying her father and yet no “good Samaritan” passed by. For whom have you recently had the opportunity to express care and compassion? Did you or did you not act in a way that “shows love and justice in action”?



About the Author

Rev. Dr. Wati Longchar is a Baptist minister from Nagaland, India, who currently serves as the International Associate Missionary and Consultant of International Ministries (IM) for Theological Education Ministry of East and South Asia, a position formed through a partnership with American Baptist Churches USA and Ao Baptist Arogo Mungdang (ABAM) / Ao Baptist Church Association.



Zoom Ecclesiology: The Church Scattered and Gathered

Paul S. Fiddes | United Kingdom

For those of us in the Baptist way of being church, three keywords of ecclesiology are covenant, fellowship, and body. I want to explore the form that these are taking virtually in our experience today of lockdowns, quarantines, and self-isolation as well as our use of such networking programs as Zoom.

1. COVENANT

This is a special word for Baptists, and it has been since our earliest days. Churches, we have believed, are gathered by covenant, whether written down or not. Covenant is an agreement in two dimensions: a vertical commitment to God in Christ in the power of the Spirit and a horizontal commitment to each other. In our gathering together, we make actual in time and space the eternal covenant of God for the redeeming of all creation. The one who makes and mediates this covenant is the risen Christ. So in covenant we do not just choose to gather together as one option among others; we believe that we are being gathered by Christ. Gathering is not merely a voluntary matter but a question of obedience and discipleship.

In days of lockdown, we are still being gathered by Christ. It is a matter of covenant responsibility to each other to gather in whatever way we can. A Zoom ecclesiology based on covenant relationship means that we don't just choose to use social media, if we have it, to gather – whether by laptop, tablet, or phone. We are being called by Christ to be faithful to each other. And if we have members who have no means of digital communication or who cannot use it, we are under the compulsion of covenant to find an alternative.

We will shortly be in a period of mixed format for doing church when some members of the congregation will feel it safe to gather in a building, but others will still prefer to gather at home using the internet. This makes it all the more important for members of a congregation to be faithful to each other in meeting for worship by whatever media it can use. This means, I suggest, a commitment regardless of the efficiency or the professionalism of the product. I mean that once we are into the media game, choice often takes over. We look for the most attractive product, perhaps the most entertaining material. We may ask who's offering the best YouTube worship service or televised service? Who's got the best music, the best videos, the best preachers? The local church product may inevitably look less attractive than other offerings freely available to us into which large costs and huge resources have been poured. But I believe that whatever the form of presentation of a local church, we are committed to be involved, committed to be there with the fellow believers with whom we have been drawn into covenant. I believe it's not a matter of choice. It's not a voluntary principle – it's covenant commitment to God and others.

2. FELLOWSHIP

If we now turn our minds to the second term, “fellowship,” it is easy to shrink the idea into meeting together in one place (church or chapel) for worship or more socially for tea, coffee, and conversation – all of which is valuable in itself while difficult to achieve now. But I want to say that our fellowship is more than either local or even human.

In prayer and worship, we are being drawn more deeply into the eternal fellowship, the *koinonia* of the triune God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – a communion of inexhaustible life and love. In that fellowship, embraced in the flowing currents of love and justice in God, is a vast community.

God is making room for all within God's own self. I mean people of all ages, in all places, present and past. There are people there who are inside and outside the visible church. The Trinity, we might say, is God's own Zoom program. It is the largest social network there can be – a web far greater than the internet.

Now, this is of course an encouragement to us. We are actually never alone, however self-isolated we are, but held in God's social media. When we pray for others, we are adding our love to God's own love for them. As we pray for

others, God is communicating our care and concern to them because they are held in God's network of relations. God is making our love for them a part of God's own love. So our prayers under lockdown should be more than local as they tend to become. We should have the confidence to have the widest vision.

This fellowship also calls us to make an effort to open up the circle of our fellowship to other people's social circles. This period, when many more people are using the internet, offers an opportunity to share links to our particular fellowship and to invite others to connect. In this connection, we must be open to hearing the stories of others, and then we will learn a great deal more about what our own faith means. We shall learn more about what God is doing in the world, and we shall learn more about our Christ who is out there in the world. You could call this widening of fellowship "mission," but it is of course God's mission, *missio dei*, not ours.

3. THE BODY

In the New Testament, the phrase "the body of Christ" is not just a figure of speech or a metaphor. Today we might say of medical staff that they are "a fine body of women and men," and that's a helpful image. But "body of Christ" means even more than this. It means that Christ is using human bodies and even materials of the natural world to become visible in our world and to offer himself to be met and touched as people could do during his earthly life on the dusty roads of Galilee or in the streets of its towns.

This is why "body of Christ" in the New Testament has three meanings: it is the glorious risen body of Christ, the communion bread, and the Church. These are not three different meanings. They fuse together. The risen body of Christ becomes present through the breaking of bread in the community of believers. So as we look around a congregation in a church building, the face of Christ takes form and shape as we look at the many faces of those gathered there. Like an identikit picture, the features of Christ come together through the many faces, and the face of Christ stands out and can be seen, not in one person alone but in fellowship together.

Yet we often can't see each other's faces when we are gathered in a building like a chapel. Here our gathering online through technology like Zoom gives a special opportunity for 're-memembering' (putting together) the body of Christ. The screen offers a new possibility for the face of Christ to be 're-memembered' in the faces on display there, combined with the voices of those who are engaging with us by phone. There are, of course, those members who cannot

use social media. We need to put photographs of them on the screen to join the montage of faces, to see the face of Christ properly.

When we cannot embrace each other or link hands, it is more difficult to experience “touching” the body of Christ. But sharing the Lord’s Supper online can be an important way of putting together the features of Christ and of touching his body. Breaking the bread does not have to be done at a distance. Members who are part of the covenanted fellowship can have bread and wine or juice with them and can join with the ordained minister in co-consecration, using the “words of institution,” or as I would prefer to say, the words of consecration. All members can say with the minister and –above all – with Christ, “This is my body. This is my blood.” So word and action can come together in each place. The presence of Christ can be known more deeply through the broken bread and through the great cloud of witnesses who surround us on the screen, through the phone, or through their pictures.

If, and as, we move into a time of mixtures of meetings, some of the congregation in a church building, some still self-isolating, others having been house-bound long before COVID-19, we should seek to actualize a Zoom ecclesiology in this situation. For example, we can have the video, voices, or pictures of those who are at home up on a screen in front of those who are gathered in the building as fellow participants in worship. It may be that having had a period of lockdown will give us the vision and the skills to worship in a way that makes even more real our covenant and fellowship in the body of Christ.

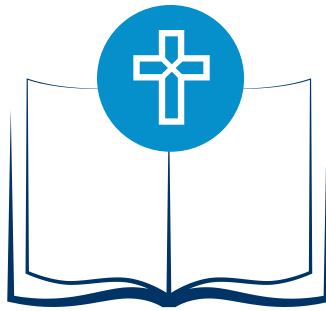
For Reflection and Discussion

1. Christians have been forced to redefine what it means to “gather” in these days of COVID-19 restrictions. What alternatives to traditional, in-person gatherings have you developed to help your community connect?
2. How has the internet allowed global Christians to widen their fellowship? Share specific stories.
3. Sharing the Lord’s Supper is typically very hands-on and personal. What alternative methods have you tried for Communion and what were the results?



About the Author

Paul Fiddes is a British Baptist theologian and novelist. He holds the Title of Distinction of Professor of Systematic Theology in the University of Oxford and was formerly Principal of Regent’s Park College and Chairman of the Theology Faculty.



GRASSROOTS STORIES



A Church Response to the COVID-19 Crisis: The Case of the Baptist Church in Central Africa (CBCA)

Polisi Kivava and the CBCA Team | Canada & Democratic Republic of Congo

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is still struggling with various political and economic challenges with some parts of the country are still recovering from the trauma of Ebola. The rise of COVID-19 all over the world has not spared our country either. The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the DRC was announced in Kinshasa on March 10, 2020, and according to recent reports, almost all our provinces have been affected with an accumulation of more than 240,000 cases and nearly 700 deaths. Thousands more are still in treatment.

The DRC is experiencing challenges in containing the spread of this virus, but so far it is not as deadly as Ebola – a pandemic which the eastern part of the country still has vivid memories of. Although more than 80% of COVID-19 patients are generally progressing well, there are still concerns about the

growing numbers due to the poor infrastructure of the current health system, which many fear will be inadequate to care for all these patients. Because of our experience with Ebola in Eastern and North-Eastern Congo, the issue of COVID-19 is creating significant fear among the population, including among church members. People are living under constant fear of becoming the next victim. Preventive measures such as lockdown, the closing of churches, schools, and other public institutions dealt a dramatic blow upon the social lives of people who were accustomed to big gatherings for Sunday services, weddings, funerals, and other celebrations. Additionally, the minds of the population are further confused by wrong information inculcated by politicians who are encouraging people to resist some of the measures designed to fight the pandemic. However, remembering the number of people who lost their lives to Ebola, people have remained open and willing to accept the recommended prevention measures, which will contribute to reducing the number of COVID-19 infections.

To help slow the spread of the virus, restrictive measures were put in place by the President of the Republic since March 2020. These measures slowed down businesses and affected traffic patterns and public transport systems. Home confinement has created problems in various households. Partners who were not used to spending the day together were forced to do so while facing tensions due to severe economic difficulties. During this time, some children seemed unaware of what was happening because many parents did not inform them of the reality. They had only been instructed not to go to school, not to attend Sunday School, not to greet or play with friends, and to stay at home – all without knowing why. Unfortunately, this sad reality has affected their behavior, feelings, thoughts, emotions, and even their faith to some extent. One thing is certain – they needed accompaniment, and that's exactly where the church came in.



Training farmers about COVID-19 prevention and distribution of handwashing kits

As soon as the government announced the measures to fight COVID-19, the church president wrote to all pastors to sensitize their congregants to respect these measures. Sunday services were to be held in families. The letter also included orientations for special prayers for the end of the pandemic. Thanks to social media, the pastor was able to send a program for Sunday worship. Some

families managed to collect some offerings, but in rural areas, most pastors were not so lucky. However, farmers in rural areas were lucky to have almost

no identified cases in their communities, and they always had the possibility to cultivate their fields and get local food. The challenge for them was getting commodities from the city such as salt, cooking oil, and other first need commodities. Once a month, church members who could afford it were invited to bring supplies to the church for distribution to families which had nothing to eat.

In addition to those local initiatives, the CBCA, with the support of its partners, embarked on a campaign called “Jikinga na ukinge wengine” (Protect Yourself and Protect the Others) whereby different activities were organized, especially to raise awareness and support for the vulnerable. In one of these activities, elderly people (especially widows and retired pastors) were given beans, maize, salt, and cooking oil. In Goma, 67 households each received 20 kilograms of rice. In other areas, during the lockdown, more than 175 households of elderly people, widows, and people living with disabilities received food support, including rice and beans but also protective masks. The police were also among the target of sensitization of preventive measures. In fact, while they were supposed to enforce the decision of the government, many of them did not wear masks. Since the lockdown was not comprehensive, the active groups such as taxi and motorcycle drivers, vendors in public markets, and traffic police officers were also given masks both for themselves but also as sensitizers. More than 8,000 masks were distributed for that purpose in each of the big cities.

In Goma, drinking water was distributed to the population of the surrounding parts of the city that are not supplied with water by the national water management system. Tanks were also installed in public places with soap and hand washing equipment to ensure that people had the means to keep their hands clean to prevent contaminations. After a few months, this activity was extended to other public places when they were partially opened. These tanks are still used by the local population.



To avoid abuses in law enforcement, more than 600 leaflets were distributed to the police and state authorities to mobilize them to respect human rights in the response to COVID-19. This was in response to many people raising concerns about the behavior of some police who were ransoming people that were found with masks and treating them

without dignity. The church, therefore, played its prophetic role in promoting social justice.

In terms of sensitization, the CBCA mobilized its local radio stations in Butembo, Buturande, Goma, and Idjwi to broadcast information related to preventive measures and to sensitize people about testing. The core message was “Protect yourself and protect the others.” It also helped to prevent misconceptions and prejudices like the one that had been disseminated during Ebola teaching that the pandemic was a curse rather than a disease. The same message was transmitted through social media using WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. In urban areas, the church organized online worship services, including translation in sign language to reach out to the hearing and speech impaired in the community.

Last, but not least, is the psycho-social accompaniment of people affected by the pandemic. It goes without saying that even when a person is healed from COVID-19, he/she continues to face prejudice and marginalization in the community. With the post-Ebola church response to the pandemic, the CBCA acquired enough experience to assist people who either got infected or lost their relatives in the pandemic. With this project, the church provides counseling to the “champions” (the word used locally for people who recovered from the pandemic) as well as their relatives and neighbors to facilitate social reintegration. To be most effective, counseling needs to be associated with psycho-economic accompaniment whereby those affected can be referred to associations that provide basic training on income-generating activities and small credit associations.

To summarize, the CBCA action against COVID-19 has been focused on three areas of action: the first one consists of local initiatives to keep the people worshipping and helping the most needy in line with the message of the Gospel (Acts 2:44). Secondly, the church helped the government to enforce the regulations which were announced by the president of the country for the sake of protection. Thirdly, with the support of partners, the church assisted people who had been infected or affected by the pandemic. In fact, the response to COVID-19 requires multidisciplinary and inclusive approaches, which corresponds to the integral mission campaign promoted by the CBCA.



*Training church leaders about counseling
in Maboya Church District*



*Offering sign language translation at
online worship service*

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Just as the people of the DRC were forever changed by Ebola, how do you anticipate the lives of those in your community being forever changed by COVID-19?
2. Which one of the CBCA's three courses of action most resonated with you and why?
3. What can be learned from CBCA's response and applied within your context?



About the Author

Polisi Kivava Baudouin is currently the Relief and Development Specialist for Africa at Canadian Baptist Ministries (CBM). Prior to CBM, he was the Director of the Department of Diaconia and Development of the Baptist Church in Central Africa (CBCA). Polisi was also the chairperson for the Action for Peace and Sustainable Development in the Great Lakes Region, a peace organization initiated by churches in Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi.



A Radical Change Toward a Full Conversion

Michel Sawan | Lebanon

For ages, poaching and illegal hunting has been and still is a major problem in Lebanon. It was a survival mechanism during the numerous wars this country has been through. But when the situation became stable, it became one of the worst nightmares for the birds and added to the other problems that our nature is facing such as air pollution, hard waste, sewage water that is mixing with the potable water, and many other problems. Every year, more than 4.9 million birds are killed in Lebanon. This country has a nickname “The Bottleneck” because it gathers the bird migration lines from different places of Europe into one line toward Africa, twice per year during fall and spring seasons.

I live in a town called Kfarhabou located in the north of Lebanon. One of the most famous traditions that my town is well known for is hunting. But sadly, it went way beyond its limit. Poaching became a priority here, and many youngsters were distracted by this act and broke the rules just to have the joy of killing birds and animals in unlimited numbers. This act has pushed many

students to leave school or even quit their job because they became addicted to it. Young men sit together and talk for hours. Most of these talks are not constructive, often leading to smoking, drinking, cursing, and adopting many bad habits. They enjoy these acts, so poaching became a priority to them. They not only practice it during the day but also at night, especially because the bird migration is at its peak during the night. They lure the birds with LED lights and calling machines and then kill everything that flies, gamebirds and non-gamebirds.

This bad habit did not save our youth, but many of them have been filling their free time or replacing their productive time with this outlaw behavior. Therefore, I made the decision to do something about it. I started awareness sessions among youth. I visited their schools, and I started a raptor rescue center where I take them from time to time to show them how much time it takes from my day to take care of wounded birds. I explained that a few seconds of their unexplained joy will cost lots of money to treat the birds medically and a significant time investment to care for them. I even started taking them on birdwatching tours, and I explain the importance of these birds to nature and how amazing our God is who created these birds for a reason.

I also encourage them to shoot birds with a camera, not a gun. I remind them there are more important things in life to do than hunting and illegal poaching. And I always tell them that this so-called hobby is chaining them as a sin. It's taking from the time that should be consecrated to God and to be in partnership with him.



This was very hard to do at the beginning. But when the economic situation in Lebanon became totally devastated, they started to realize that they need to think about how to survive for the next period that will come. They started to think more seriously before they decided to go hunting.

Many troubles face me in achieving this radical change and turning it to a complete change:

1. The corruption in my country that impacts enforcement of the law and the police soldiers who are supposed to apply the law but often participate in the illegal poaching themselves.
2. The gadgets to practice the substitute hobby are not available in every house here (cameras, binoculars).

3. The need for medical supplements that we need to treat the wounded birds that some of the youth bring to us (shot or found).

Therefore, I decided to start my own non-governmental organization and ask for funds to supply all the needs. But due to COVID-19, the procedures to secure permission are very slow. I started to go across the country to spread awareness among the people, especially students. Sometimes I take one of the youth whose behavior has changed as a witness, and we talk about the creation of God and how beautiful it is.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. How is creation care a reflection of our calling as Christians?
2. What steps can we take to break cycles that are impacting creation in a negative way?



About the Author

Michel Sawan is a doctor specializing in Physiotherapy and a member of Kfarhabou Baptist Church in north Lebanon. He holds five first records in birdwatching in Lebanon and has been a bird rescuer since 2009. He is a recognized wildlife photographer with three Daily Dozen winning photos from National Geographic and the founder of Lebanese Association for Migratory Birds.



A Reflection on the Church Response to the Pandemic Crisis from a Naga Context

Kezhanlehou Shuya | India

The COVID-19 pandemic which broke out last year did indeed take the whole world by surprise and brought many nations of the world to their knees. This pandemic crisis made us all see and experience the global paradigm shift taking place in every dimension of human life, leading to both negative and positive impacts. It also brought about many changes in education, politics, economics, society, and religion. The rate at which the pandemic spread was alarmingly fast and uncontrollable. The world and the Church in particular were unprepared to face – let alone tackle – such a life-threatening crisis which in the initial stage brought many churches in Nagaland to a standstill.

In the beginning, there were many arguments and confusion within the church itself as to how the church should respond to the crisis and to the many resulting challenges. On the one hand, the church as responsible citizens in society, had to decide whether to heed the authorities' concern and obey the

government's order prohibiting religious and mass gatherings, thereby suspending regular church worship services and various soul-nurturing activities for months. On the other hand, the church leaders had to face criticisms (as "lacking in faith") from various sections of society and from its own members for complying with the state government's order. The pandemic not only affected the world's economy, but it also had an adverse effect on the finances of the church. Much of the church's mission projects and work within and beyond our home had to be either suspended for a time or had to be stopped completely. One of the biggest challenges the churches had to face was how to continue to spiritually nurture their flock and stay relevant to the spiritual needs of its congregation in such a crisis, given the restrictions and prohibitions on corporate worship, mass gatherings, and community fellowships.

However, in the midst of such a global crisis and chaos, the church remained unshaken in its faith because no matter what the situation is, the church holds on to the faith that "the Lord is sovereign and in control, and He will lead his church safely through the storms of life." Indeed, the Lord Jesus who is the head of his church has been faithfully leading and guiding his churches in Nagaland thus far. The churches in Nagaland first responded to the crisis through prayer and fasting, coming together to intercede for the nation and for the world against COVID-19. After this, despite the many criticisms thrown at the church leaders, the church as a mature and responsible member of society decided to set an example by obeying the government's orders and rules. Churches suspended all forms of mass gatherings/activities in order to protect members from the pandemic and for the welfare of the society at large. While complying with the government order, the church's main concern was to find ways to stay relevant to the spiritual needs of its members. Therefore, the churches also made use of every alternative and available opportunity to reach out to their congregation. Initiatives included online worship, online encouragement/preaching/prayer, and individual home fellowships. Listed below is a short reflection as to how the church could respond to the crisis:

1. The pandemic brought about restrictions and prohibitions of mass gatherings and corporate worship in religious places. With this new situation, churches can take advantage of the technological resources available, shifting their regular worship services to virtual online worship services. This way, most churches could stay relevant by continuing to meet the spiritual needs of their congregation through online preaching/teaching.
2. The pandemic crisis has helped churches realize that true worship of God cannot be localized or restricted to a specific physical location, but

believers' worship of God is a spiritual reality that can happen anytime, anywhere. The Lord Jesus himself said, "Where one or two gather in my name, there I am."

3. Most of the churches in our local context are technologically ill-equipped, while many members within the congregation are still technologically illiterate. Therefore, online worship services could benefit the more advanced churches but not all churches. Since many churches could not have online services, the church leaders encouraged and guided their congregations to have individual family worship and home fellowships. Due to the pandemic, many churches shifted their focus from corporate worship to individual family worship, which proved to be a blessing to many families because it strengthened the relationship between members of the family as they spent time together in prayer, songs, and reading of the Word. Many broken families could reconcile with one another through family worship. It was also a revival of the early church form of worship (1st century AD) where the early believers met and fellowshiped together as "the church" in individual homes.
4. Amidst the pandemic and the economic crisis, the church has grown stronger and richer in love. The body of Christ responded to the crisis by going beyond its four walls and reaching out to the world with the love of Christ. They provided services, charitable works, and acts of kindness. Many believers selflessly came forward to serve others through giving financial assistance and material support (food, clothing, and other essential goods) to those who are physically in need and in despair irrespective of religion or race. The Church has widened its spiritual task by becoming more socially responsible towards its neighbor.
5. COVID-19 affected the whole world irrespective of race, sex, nationality, religion, or status. It also caused both believers and non-believers alike to re-examine the importance of God, the meaning and purpose of life, and the problem of death. The pandemic also helped humanity realize the futility of trusting in human strength and wisdom as well as how helpless finite beings are without the Creator. The global pandemic crisis provided fertile ground and the right platform for the Church to present the good news of salvation to the world. It paved the way for the Church to interact, guide, and help their fellow human beings (including those belonging to other faiths) to seek the Savior Jesus Christ who alone is the hope and solution to our present crisis.
6. Many nominal Christians were awakened to the fact that Scripture's warnings and signs of the last days are indeed coming to pass. The

pandemic made many backslidden Christians realize that their security is only in Christ is, and only in Him can we experience life in abundance. Many of them are returning to the Lord by recommitting themselves to the Lord in repentance.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. How did you seek to strike a balance between “having faith” and obeying government regulations?
2. In what ways can your church maintain engagement and community with those who lack technological resources?
3. Have you found that the pandemic has created a fertile ground for Gospel sharing in your community?



About the Author

Kezhanlehou Shuya earned his Master of Divinity from Oriental Theological Seminary in Dimapur and a Master of Theology from Torch Trinity in Seoul, South Korea. He is currently serving as Associate Pastor of Town Baptist Church in Chumukedima (Nagaland, India).



A Society's Outpouring of Kindness

Sophia Williams | Jamaica

The plight of a 33-year-old mother was shared on the television news subsequent to the COVID-19 pandemic reaching the shores of Jamaica. She was laid off from her job as a domestic helper as the pandemic took its toll. Consequently, she was unable to provide for her eight children as a single mother. The deplorable and unsafe condition in which they lived was not left unnoticed, and many later witnessed the outpouring of compassion and love in response to her situation. She received more than she bargained for in gifts and goodies from kindhearted people at home and abroad. Most importantly, she is the beneficiary of much-improved living accommodation for herself and her children. What was most admirable in the news story about this mother is the quality of home schooling she offered her children who are performing ahead of their peers.

This happens to be one of several ways people have been cared for in the midst of the economic challenges and anxieties caused by COVID-19. Many organizations gave support through care initiatives during the early stages, allowing people to better handle the sudden impact and the uncertainties ahead. These acts of compassion and care were as follows:

- The Private Sector Organization (PSOJ) contributed \$150 million toward the purchase of ventilators. Ventilators are critical to pneumonia patients, which help in restoring their oxygen levels, thus preventing them from dying.⁴¹
- The Montego Bay-based Carlisle Inn owned by the Sandals Group was offered as accommodation for patients recovering from COVID-19.
- Sandals Resorts had also decided against laying off its permanent workers, opting to pay 40 percent of their basic salary fortnightly and retain benefits such as health insurance and paid vacation leave despite the temporary closure of all its resorts in the Caribbean.
- The National Water Commission offered a \$500 million debt write-off for customers struggling to pay their bills.
- Scotiabank and JN Bank suspended repossession and resale assets for customers falling in arrears.
- The Student Loans Bureau waived application and processing fees.
- JPS Foundation donated COVID-19 test kits in addition to offering support to the elderly and disabled persons.
- The government provided compassionate grants and care packages for the needy, and street people were provided with two meals daily.

The pandemic presented an opportunity to be there for each other, bearing one another's burden, and being our brother's keeper (Gal. 6:2). Given the attending challenges of COVID-19, it presents a stark reminder of our vulnerability when it comes to diseases, demonstrating that while things such as wealth and education may make us seem better than others, this pandemic has taught us otherwise. The coronavirus has extinguished any classism and division within our society, transcending all class, race, and stages in life, barring none for its purpose. Moving on, this reflection will help us to understand how the demonstration of compassion and justice in our society is significant to our survival and wellbeing in various aspects of our lives.

COMPASSION

Compassion is defined as “a feeling of distress and pity for the suffering or misfortune of another, often including the desire to alleviate it,” according to

⁴¹ *Private sector pledges \$150 million to COVID-19 fight*, (Jamaica Gleaner, 2020), <http://jamaicagleaner.com/article/news/20200322/private-sector-pledges-150-million-covid-19-fight>

the Collins English Dictionary.⁴² It is derived from the ecclesiastical Latin word *compati*, which means to “suffer with.” Scripture teaches how God demonstrates compassion through mercy, love, and forgiveness. This is made evident in various ways:

- First, compassion is forgiveness that offers tolerance and understanding for our mistakes to free us from the guilt of poor decisions and wasting of resources that would be available to us in times of crisis. As the pandemic hit, some persons, such as our popular entertainers whom would have seen the good times prior, felt the economic brunt. Many in the society blamed them for being ill-prepared, citing that they should not benefit from the government’s care programmes. However, as a society with shortcomings and vulnerabilities, we are called to show mercy and love as the story of the Prodigal Son reminds us (Luke 15:11-32).
- Second, compassion is intervening in the human condition of hunger and lack of the basic needs for survival. Radio Jamaica’s Hotline host, Emily Shields, initiated the Hotline for the Elderly Programme from which many have benefitted through care packages and assistance with varying social needs. The elderly are one of the most susceptible groups in relation to the coronavirus, so with this in mind, she reached out to this group in a special way. The Word is, “Do this for them, and you do it also for Me.” (Matthew 25:40).
- Third, we need compassion in our distress of physical and emotional pain. There was the case of a “Good Samaritan” highlighted on the television news: a man saw the plight of another man on the roadside within the vicinity of the Kingston Public Hospital. He was obviously outraged and demanded that the hospital provide the attention and care for this ailing man who was subsequently admitted for medical care. We may not be able to eliminate certain pain and affliction, but through words of encouragement, prayer, and seeking professional intervention on behalf of others, this can make a difference. God works through us to be close to the brokenhearted and save the crushed in spirit (Psalm 34:18).

While showing compassion is good, it does not stop there. There is the need to take it further by advocating on behalf of those who lack the necessary

⁴² HarperCollins Publishers, (Collins, 2021), <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/compassion>

resources and defending the oppressed and victimized. In other words, assist in pursuing justice to end the cycle of dependency and reprisals.

JUSTICE

Justice is defined as just behavior or treatment; the quality of being fair and reasonable; and the administration of the law or authority in maintaining this, according to the Oxford Dictionary.⁴³ Therefore, one will agree that part of justice is showing compassion, such as in social justice, a call for the respect of human basic rights, and showing care and concern for the needs of others who are faced with injustice. Justice may be represented as follows:

- First, in a well-ordered society justice is seen to be done. One will be judged for an offense committed against the law with the relevant penalty applied. The Disaster Risk Management Act exists to contain the spread of the coronavirus. For example, those who hold illegal parties against the COVID-19 guidelines are brought to book. Justice is handed down for the protection of the society and to preserve lives (Isaiah 56:1).
- Second, society must speak out, and not remain silent in cases of injustice, breaches of the law, and mistreatment. In such cases, it is working with the enforcers of the law by reporting the crimes you observe, such as the illegal parties and those endangering the health of others by not wearing a mask. Do your part, preserve the law, do what is right (Psalm 106:3).
- Third, lobby on behalf of the less fortunate to ensure they have the rights and benefit of basic needs, decent accommodation, and a livable wage. It is about advocacy. Given the challenges of the pandemic, there are many people who cannot afford masks and hand sanitizers, let alone to change a mask every day or more frequently as required. Organizations such as the Church advocate within their membership to contribute these items toward care packages as part of their community outreach initiatives. It is speaking up for the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31: 8-9).

PRAYER

Our Father and Protector, you have brought us thus far. We pray for your sustaining grace and strength to carry us through this crisis as we remember those who are affected – whether from contracting the virus, by caring for an

⁴³ Lexico (powered by Oxford 2021), <https://www.lexico.com/definition/justice>

infected loved one, or have lost a loved one as a result. Lord, let our total trust be in you as we do our part in combating the virus and protecting the most vulnerable among us. In Christ Jesus's name we pray. Amen.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What will it take for this momentum of kindness to continue?
2. What have you learned from this crisis? How can this guide you to handle future crises?
3. Do you think stronger measures are necessary to protect the population in crises of this proportion?



About the Author

Sophia Williams is the past chairman of the Communications and Media Committee of Boulevard Baptist Church in Jamaica. She earned a Masters in Theology (UWI) with training in Pastoral Care, Counselling Psychology, and Social Work. She also holds a degree in Electrical Engineering (UTech).



An Emergency Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Joe & Phoebe Santiago | The Philippines

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines occurred in the middle of March 2020. It happened during the time when many of our poorer families, both in the rural and urban areas, had not fully recovered from the devastation of super typhoon Ursula that hit the Visayas Islands during Christmas Eve of 2019. Kabuganaan Philippines Ministries (KPM) was still implementing the remaining relief and rehabilitation activities for the affected families.

While the Philippines periodically experiences calamities such as typhoon, flood, earthquakes, and drought, the deadly COVID-19 virus was an unexpected disaster. Our country and people were not prepared for such a calamity.

During this outbreak, the Philippine President declared a health emergency and placed many parts of the country – including our region – under lockdowns and restrictions in compliance with mandated health protocols. KPM leadership took time to pause, pray, and make necessary plans.

Representatives from our global partner Canadian Baptist Ministries (CBM) were involved in our prayers and planning activities. Together, we were able to come up with an emergency response plan, which we submitted to CBM. Aside from the plan we submitted to our overseas partner, a plan was made for our local bodies, our denomination (Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches) and our provincial body (Capiznon Baptist Churches or Kasapulan). Both our overseas partner and local bodies responded positively to our proposal and campaign for assistance and support.

As program administrators, it was our responsibility to secure necessary permits from the Department of Health Inter-Agency Task Force for COVID-19 and from the local government units so that we could have mobility to serve those needing assistance. One concrete example was when CBM decided to recall their Global Field Staff in the Philippines to return to their home country of Canada. Job, being the local partner, had to facilitate their safe travel by driving them to Iloilo International Airport for immediate repatriation.

Maximizing the use and mobilization of our material and human resources, we were able to extend emergency response assistance to the following groups:

- ***Lucero Baptist Church & Community.*** Lucero was the first community in the province that was locked down for almost a month due to a positive case found in a resident working at the Provincial Health Office. Restrictions on going in and out of the community were strictly imposed on residents and non-residents. KPM initiated the supply of relief goods – including face masks, alcohol, hand soap, etc., to around 300 people. It also provided money to buy food. Assistance was facilitated through the local government unit that has access to the area. Our Kasapulan churches were informed of the situation of the Lucero Baptist Church and their whole community and were requested to share something for the affected families and to offer prayers on their behalf until health restrictions were lifted.
- ***Health Workers of Capiz Emmanuel Hospital.*** This facility, affiliated with the Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches, is more than a century old and is a Level II hospital located in Roxas City. When the pandemic broke out, the hospital was faced with so many needs and challenges. With the help of CBM, we were able to extend emergency relief assistance to around 350 health workers by providing them needed Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs), food and housing during lockdowns and quarantine periods, consultations and testing, and hospitalization for those affected.

- ***Preschool Children.*** Children up to 14 years old were not allowed to leave their homes. During lockdowns, we provided our preschool children with face masks made by our women's group. 120 children were provided face masks in our five childcare centers. This was extended to the children as well as to their parents.
- ***Poor Communities.*** KPM is serving the poor in two urban communities in the city, namely Libas and Nipa. These depressed communities are thickly populated with poor facilities and government services. Their houses are the most vulnerable to calamities like typhoons. KPM has childcare centers in these areas which are used not only for children's learning sessions but also for community meetings and gatherings. Aside from the face masks which we extended to parents, we have also distributed rice to around 100 families. These families were badly affected by restrictions, and their communities were locked down. As a result, the mothers could not go to the market to sell fish and vegetables or to buy food for their family. The fathers, who are primarily fisher folks, were not allowed to go fishing. They were faced with this miserable situation for a month.
- ***Pastors Locked Down in Their Churches in Capiz Province and Muslim Faith Community in Mindanao.*** A number of pastors were also affected by lockdowns. Mass gatherings, including church Sunday worship services, were not allowed. Material support and monetary offerings of members went down in small rural churches. KPM extended financial support to 50 pastors in the province who were locked down in their churches. 15 Muslim brothers and sisters and their respective families were also extended financial assistance for food and other basic needs.
- ***Missionary Teachers and PBEA Scholars.*** In addition to the emergency relief and financial assistance KPM extended to affected communities, churches, families, and individuals, we have also extended Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services (MHPSS) to our frontline medical workers, pastors, five missionary teachers, and 17 PBEA youth scholars. This was conducted by licensed guidance counselors.

REFLECTIONS

We are living in a world with so many unpredictable happenings and things beyond human control. The poorest of the poor are the most vulnerable when calamities and disasters occur. Although the COVID-19 virus respects no one, still the poorer countries suffer the most. The pandemic in the Philippines is not only a health issue – it is also an economic issue. Lockdowns and

restrictions mean loss of job and livelihood opportunities for the poor families, which result in hunger and starvation – especially among children.

The Church as a faith community is conscious of the Great Commission of the Lord Jesus Christ, translating it into holistic integral mission. This is reflected in caring for the least of these – our sisters and brothers – regardless of who and what they are.

We must bear the light of Christ so that people affected by disaster may continue to live with hope

The Church, which is also part of the community, is not exempt from the catastrophe. Pastors and members alike suffer, becoming both victims and survivors. But as a faith community living in hope in the resurrected Christ, we must rise up above the situation. We must bear the light of Christ so that people affected by disaster may continue

to live with hope in the living God. Amazingly, with God in his bountiful love and grace, we did not have any casualty among those who received our assistance and services.

Forging partnerships among local, national, and global faith communities is a must – especially during disaster – as there are many real-life situations and challenges being faced in this broken world. As partners for Christ's mission, let us continue to hold hands together as we are being firmly held by the loving hand of God the creator and sustainer of life who promised never to leave nor forsake us and be with us until the end of age.

In the midst of all these local and global disasters, we are still thankful to God for keeping our faith alive and the flame burning so that we can continue to faithfully serve him until the end. To God be glory and honor in all the earth!

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What challenges does it create to respond when a disaster strikes on the heels of another disaster?
2. What economic impact has COVID-19 caused in your community? How can you reach out to the most vulnerable to meet practical needs right now?
3. When responding to disasters, what value do you see in forging partnerships on a local, national, and global level?



About the Authors

Rev. Job Santiago is an ordained minister of the Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches (CPBC) and currently the chairman of the Board of Capiz Emmanuel Hospital in Roxas City. He also serves as the Executive Minister of the Capiznon (Kasapulanan) Baptists. Pastor Phoebe Santiago works at Filamer Christian University in Roxas City as the Guidance Director. They have both served as administrators of Kabuganaan Philippines Ministries, Inc. (KPM) since its founding in 1997. They have been married for 39 years and are proud parents of three adult children and three grandchildren.



Be the Church Outside the Temple

Lília Dias Marianno | Brazil

In this brief essay, we would like to present the experience of the Igreja Batista de Água Branca (Ibab) located in the capital city of São Paulo, Brazil, which adopted the following motto during the pandemic: "Being Church Outside the Temple." IBAB has a congregation that exceeds 5,000 enrolled members, but it is impossible to measure the global reach of this community's actions. Its YouTube channel has more than 210,000 subscribers and registers more than 25,000 views of the Sunday services.

Since the early 1990s when the leadership redirected its emphasis to the pure and simple Gospel of Jesus Christ, the community started to dedicate itself more to the mission and to the organicity of the body of Christ while progressively detaching itself from religious institutionalism. With this, it became a reference and has blessed hundreds of thousands of people around the globe.

The ministry team, led by pastor Ed René Kivitz, is composed of the following pastors: Eduardo Fetterman (Teenagers), Filipe dos Anjos (Adult and City),

Claudio Manhães (Pastoral), André Saldiba (Families and Youth), Robinson Jacintho (Small Groups and Education), Paulo César Baruk (Celebration), Silvia Kivitz (Mission and IBAB Solidarity Solidarity Network), and Fernanda Kivitz (Children). Different voices on this team have contributed to this report.

When the pandemic began, IBAB was one of the first communities to publicly announce the suspension of its in-person services. Many leaders were skeptical about the devastating potential of the pandemic, and they took too long to make the same decision. For the leadership of the church, the key factor was to protect people's lives, considering the high risk of contamination in the interaction between children (inevitable transmitters) and the elderly (risk group) who are grandparents of these same children. The children's congregation that met on Sundays at IBAB exceeded a thousand members.

IBAB was already a very representative community in social networks. The pandemic accentuated its representativeness, but the worship in community was sensitively transformed. Eduardo Fetterman, who also works with the worship team, said IBAB invested in more equipment so that the broadcasting had the highest quality possible, and he emphasized the suffering that many communities experience precisely because they do not have such resources to invest in a similar structure in times of lockdown. The in-person worship team was reduced. The worship songs were pre-recorded while the preaching is broadcast live.

In the small groups, the dynamic was centered on strengthening fellowship, even virtually. Most of the volunteers in the various ministries still lack the opportunity of in-person service. Although the virtual meetings are preserving connections since the teenagers are very relational, they are sometimes discouraged by the lack of in-person community with their groups. This is why the weekly meetings have been adapted to roundtables to facilitate more interaction.

On the dynamics of community worship, Fernanda Kivitz reports that "the pandemic has put us before the challenge of living, in fact, the experience of being church beyond attending church/institution."

In the children's ministry, we focused on the "possibility of being church in families." As families were attending the church, each person in the family had a unique experience that was not necessarily shared with others. Understanding that parents are the main mediators of children's spiritual

*A positive point was this
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experiences, the experience of being church as a family was stimulated. A positive point was this "rescue of the family experience around the Bible, proposing meaningful conversations at home."

IBAB is recognized as a church that is very committed to mission and its social insertion.

The church supports 52 organizations and socio-missionary projects of human care through the IBAB Solidarity Network. In this pandemic year, the leadership appealed to the generosity of the community to respond to the increase in human suffering and needs. During the pandemic, the community not only grew in maturity but was mobilized even more for actions of mercy, compassion, and justice – responding to the global crisis in a positive and inspiring way.

The greatest proof of this response came in December 2020 when the community experienced something unprecedented. The Christmas campaigns, which have been running for 19 years, have always been very challenging. The 2020 offering goal was bigger than the previous ones. The community exceeded the established offering goal by 120%, impacting the life of each member in a unique way.

The church community also addresses the needs of its members. Besides the social assistance provided to the neediest families, the IBAB Solidarity Network promoted mentoring and seminars for small entrepreneurs. Well-established entrepreneurs from the corporate world came to help small entrepreneurs who needed to reinvent their professional activities due to the collapse in the economy and in the workplace. An eye for equity within and outside the community is part of IBAB's identity.

In Eduardo Fetterman's view, the church has become more present in Brazil as a whole by not only offering quality content, but also by reaching more people with the Gospel. In partnerships with organizations such as UNICEF and World Vision, he led mercy actions on many levels, including buying and sending 1,000 oxygen cylinders to Manaus, rescuing the city in the biggest crisis of the second wave of COVID-19 in January 2021. Some mercy actions were interrupted, such as the in-person educational support that teenagers provided to people with cognitive limitations and to Bolivian immigrants. On the other hand, new opportunities arose.

Fernanda Kivitz adds, "I see a community ready to serve, to give of itself, ready for work. We thirst for people, for encounter, for connection, and people need people. The pandemic and the lockdown have openly exposed the

inequalities we live in – bringing pain, anguish, and revolt. However, people have the desire to do something relevant, useful, and transformational.”

One of the most significant changes in evangelism and discipleship has been the awareness that the church is a partner to families in the discipleship of children; however, parents and caregivers of children set the core of the spiritual experiences for their little ones. With this, the children began to have experiences with Jesus in the life of their own families rather than predominantly under the leadership of the children’s ministry teachers. The church should not be responsible for a child’s spiritual journey but rather a facilitator of this process with the family.

Other ministries also involved with discipleship have made sensible adaptations to their ways of action. In the pastoral ministry, under the leadership of Pastor Claudio Manhães, there was the creation of a chaplaincy for psychological support during quarantine. A team of psychologists from the church, both male and female, started to offer their time as volunteer virtual counselors to people in need of this support and also for the health professionals who were burned out from being on the frontline of the fight against COVID-19. Also, linked to pastoral ministry, IBAB hosts the coordination of Celebrate Recovery in Brazil. The program, which recently resumed in-person, had to be adapted to virtual small and large group meetings.

"#tododiametodia" has become the community’s meeting point for prayer that preserves its identity, traditions, and faith on the paths of its dispersion in the likeness of the Hebrew people and the early Church, an initiative led by Pastor André Saldiba.

Even before the pandemic, IBAB Education Ministry was already structured to offer a high-quality Christian education in online platforms, thus reaching especially the multitude of people who feel part of IBAB but are geographically distant. The pandemic accelerated this process, and currently the ministry offers a network of short-term courses for the holiday period and a long-term course on Christian Spirituality.

Ibab is one of the rare churches in Brazil that has been dedicated to racial and gender discussions for several years. In contrast to the picture of increasing domestic violence during the pandemic, the Men’s Ministry promoted symposiums and studies in the small groups to combat gender violence. I particularly acted as a speaker in the chapter on Jesus and Nonviolent Masculinity, this being just one of several initiatives.

Ibab's Black Awareness Forum is a permanent initiative created out of the need to dialogue about and combat structural and systemic racism. During the pandemic, this forum intensified its concrete actions in the search for equity, welcoming, reconciliation, rescue of dignity, and promotion of justice, especially after the murder of George Floyd.

Many communities experienced a great disconnect among their members during the pandemic. We witnessed several leaders who were frightened by the spreading of the pandemic and financial collapse. "Being Church Outside the Temple" introduced us more deeply to this: God has all resources. In the midst of this wilderness, creativity flourished and resources emerged when human needs were prioritized. Even when the church leadership advised "take care of your family finances first," the members continued to contribute financially to the church. Those who could contributed more to help those in need. On the most important date in the life of the church community, generosity won in an exuberant way.

What IBAB is experiencing during the pandemic has deepened and extended the praxis of our vision, mission, and philosophy of ministry.

In the words of Senior Pastor Ed René Kivitz, "What IBAB is experiencing during the pandemic has deepened and extended the praxis of our vision, mission, and philosophy of ministry. In its own vision, IBAB declares that it wants 'to be a historical sign of the kingdom of God,' protagonizing in its community the same fruits of Jesus's ministry: liberation, salvation, reconciliation, and restoration of the human person in all of his/her relationships. Inspired

by the Lausanne movement and Integral Mission Theology, our mission statement says that we are a church committed to 'taking the whole Gospel to the whole man' and acts guided by this philosophy of ministry are defined as 'prioritizing relationships,' involving all members beyond the limits of worship-clergy-Sunday-temple." That is a church with a great network of relationships, *diakonia*, and integral witness of the Gospel.

The global pandemic has not caused many changes in the daily dynamics of IBAB, but it has demanded a commitment of even more sacrificial faithfulness to all that the Church has lived in its recent story in the light of the discernment it received from the Gospel, especially according to the theological reflections of Latin America.

May this example inspire us to observe the growth of opportunities for service that the pandemic has brought us. These opportunities have grown in proportion to the growth of human needs. May the pandemic teach the entire Baptist family around the world that it is time to serve creatively.

Igreja Batista de Água Branca on the Web

<https://lbab.com.br>

<https://www.youtube.com/user/oficiallbab>

<https://www.facebook.com/oficiallbab>

<https://www.instagram.com/oficiallbab>

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What does it mean to you to know that “God has all resources”?
2. The pandemic has provided increased opportunities for parents to be engaged in the spiritual formation of their children. How can your church grow in its partnership with parents to raise godly children?

About the Author



Lília Dias Marianno is a researcher, professor, and theologian with a PhD in Epistemology (UFRJ) and a MSc in Biblical Exegesis (UMESP). She has worked in various sectors of the Brazilian Baptist Convention, including the coordination of Christian Education. She is a Fellow Researcher at the Center for Process Studies (CPS) and a member of the board of directors for the Brazilian Association of Biblical Research (ABIB).



Care Project Connects Church to Community

Lécio Dornas | Brazil

The pandemic brought apprehensions, uncertainties, fears, and expectations to the ethnic church in the USA. The first shock was the need to "maintain" the church without the possibility of meeting in person. This brought the challenge of facing with seriousness and determination the need for technology use along with the necessary investment of time, resources, and training for an urgent immersion in the virtual avenues and their natural developments. This was necessary to create an online church available to those who could no longer attend in person. The first months were months of attempts, studies, frustrations, discoveries, and learning. Then, the church began to find its way and understand better how it should move through the turbulence of the pandemic crisis.

The Family Church (Igreja da Família) in Windermere is located in greater Orlando in central Florida. It is a 54-year-old church that merged with Brazilian Baptist Community of Orlando (CBBO) six years ago and launched a

ministry with Hispanics three years ago. Today it is a church with 12 services on Sundays held at five campuses in three languages (8 services in English, 3 services in Portuguese, and 1 service in Spanish). Each community (American, Brazilian, and Hispanic) needed to seek alternative ways to reach people and minister God's grace to them.

The Brazilian community of the church quickly realized they could better reach Portuguese-speaking people through the use of digital platforms. Brazilians did not react positively to the broadcasting of services or recorded services. We discovered the Cisco WebEx platform and used it both for interactive services and for the small group meetings that we needed to put in place in order to care for the people. During the pandemic, the church received new members, held baptisms, started new online small groups, the pastors and deacons made virtual visits, and even held a virtual youth conference.

**AWAKE 2020 was attended by over 7,000 young people
from more than 22 countries!**

We learned what Christians in various parts of the world already knew – the Church is not a building! We are the real church – spread around the city – living the Gospel of Jesus Christ. During the year 2020, God allowed us to assimilate this truth into our church praxis until in-person meetings became possible with the proper restrictions and safety protocols. The church began, little by little, to meet in person again.

People from high-risk groups like elders, parents with newborn children, and those who were still concerned about exposing themselves to environments with large groups of people naturally delayed their in-person attendance. The services are broadcast in real time on the church's social media channels and also on the website. There is no pressure for everyone to meet again in person, even though Florida is now living a much milder reality with a large part of the population already vaccinated and the curve of those infected by COVID-19 decreasing. Everything is going smoothly, and the church is very zealous in its constant observance of safety protocols – always putting everyone's safety first. We thank God, however, in the last few months that the services have been happening regularly, both in-person and online, and we have seen more and more people coming to the in-person meetings.

In the beginning of the year, we held another interactive and virtual worship night. It was a great blessing. During the times of biblical reflection, God spoke greatly to my heart, showing me that the church could not resign itself to the role of working to protect itself from the virus, to stay in a protective position, reactive to the news, and alert to guidance from the authorities while trying to

expand its reach through the internet, analyzing metrics, and creating ways to be more and more present online. This was too little.

The question that God shook my heart with was: How can we as a church help the Brazilians living in Greater Orlando during this pandemic? Answering this question meant radically changing our perspective on the crisis, moving from being merely victims to being agents of change. Just this awakening of the Holy Spirit has already blessed us greatly.

The Brazilians who were in quarantine immediately came to my heart. How could we help them? How could we show them love? How could we reach out with affection and solidarity? It was not necessarily the need of helping provide food and more because people in quarantine were not only those with material needs. Thus, Projeto Cuidar (Care Project) was born.

We set out to identify Brazilian families who were in quarantine because of COVID-19 in the greater Orlando area. The idea was to find these Brazilians and give them a 'care basket' which included cookies, cakes, breads, cheeses, juices, cream cheese, teas, masks, alcohol gel, and other treats. We also put in the basket a card showing the solidarity of the church and a copy of the Holy Bible as well.

We formed teams that included Logistics, Family Fundraising, Donations and Purchasing, Bag Organization, and Delivery. Shortly thereafter, several brothers volunteered! We launched the project. The teams started working, the donations began to come, the Brazilians in quarantine started being identified, and more. On the first Saturday morning, the bags were ready, and the delivery team was also ready for the first opportunity to care for those who were in quarantine!

Since then, every Saturday, a team leaves the church with the bags - sometimes only a few families, sometimes more. The Projeto Cuidar (Care Project) was a response from Family Church to the crisis, but now we are looking at it as an opportunity to serve and demonstrate Christ's love long-term. Isn't it amazing how this change of perspective blessed and edified the church?

Soon, testimonies started being shared. People were touched, receiving our gesture as a hug from God in their lives. People wrote to thank us. We witnessed big smiles from people who were surprised by the affection received. To open the door of your house and to see a beautiful basket with so much good stuff given just to say: "You are not alone!" It was a great experience for many Brazilians.

As I write this, Projeto Cuidar has already blessed more than 60 families! Isn't it wonderful? We have already made a difference in the lives of more than 60 Brazilian families in Orlando while they were in quarantine! Praise God for this

change of perspective in our church! Praise God for volunteers who have embraced the vision! Praise God for allowing us to reach these families to show the love of Christ!

In fact, we can all do something to help and serve during the crisis. But for that to happen, we need to change our perspective. We need to understand that we are not merely victims of a pandemic, rather we are called by God as the Church to be agents of change. The church is the greatest agency for transformation of lives and realities in the world!

Reality is not destiny. The Church with a healed vision and a transformational perspective of the crisis will change reality!

Prayer

Lord, we ask for your mercy in all the places where the pandemic is causing the death of so many people. We ask for your comfort for the families who now suffer the pain of the loss of their loved ones. Finally, we ask that you wake up your Church to adopt a different, liberating, peacemaking, and transforming perspective. We pray that the world may believe that you have sent us at this time to activate a true and profound project of change in the world, beginning with ourselves. In Jesus's name, Amen.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What has your church's perspective been during the pandemic?
2. Looking at the crisis as an environment that creates opportunities, what are the opportunities that God has placed before your church?
3. How can the focus of your church's leadership remain centered on the Great Commission?
4. How does Projeto Cuidar encourage and challenge your church to make a difference in this time of loneliness and loss?



About the Author

Lécio Dornas is an author, educator, and a theologian. He has served as the pastor of the Brazilian community at the Family Church in Windermere, Florida, USA, since February of 2015. He graduated from the Baptist Theology Seminary in Rio de Janeiro and studied Advanced Leadership at the Haggai Institute in Maui, Hawaii, USA. The author of 24 books, he previously served the president of the

Brazilian order of Baptist Pastors and of the North American Order of Brazilian Pastors. He also served as a member of the BWA Commission on Christian Education from 2015-2020. He is married to Dr. Polliana Boechart Dornas and father to Sarah (25) and Hannah (22).



Discovering Joy in Burma

Trisha Miller Manarin & Robert D. Cochran | USA

The American Baptist Churches, United States of America (USA), has had a deep and abiding relationship with Myanmar/Burma for over 200 years, beginning with the arrival of Ann and Adoniram Judson as missionaries to Burma. Today, Baptists are the largest Christian group there. The District of Columbia Baptist Convention (DCBC) is multiply aligned with national Baptist bodies in the USA, including the American Baptist Churches USA. Baptists from Myanmar came to the attention of D.C. Baptists in 1995. That year Calvary Baptist Church began a congregation made up of varied ethnic families who had moved to the USA capital area from Myanmar. Over time, these friends from Myanmar established numerous congregations reflecting at least three ethnicities: Chin, Kachin, and Karen. Most of these churches became a part of the DCBC.

The beauty of D.C. Baptists included these groups from Myanmar for more than 20 years. Today, seven percent of the DCBC churches are made up of those from the Burmese diaspora. By 2015, the leadership of the local

convention recognized the yearning of these new congregations to meet spiritual and physical needs in their own homeland. Ministers, both Asian-born and American-born, established a “Burma Work Group” in 2016. The group was to focus on ministry among Baptists in Myanmar. African Americans, European Americans, Chins, and Kachins came to make up the work group, receiving some input from Karens as these had opportunity to give it.

The work group and the Myanmar Baptist Convention worked together to form a covenant relationship in 2017, in that way ensuring Asian direction within the partnership. The Burma Work Group agreed to focus their attention on the three groups they knew best: the Chins, the Kachins, and the Karens. The Baptist conventions indigenous to Myanmar provided the foci for the ministry, which the D.C. Baptists undertook. As the relationships with the Baptists in Myanmar grew, so did the number of partners for this effort. Both the Palmer Fund and the Christian Education Department of the Chin Baptist Association (Falam) began to work with the Burma Work Group and its activities.

What were the objectives of the partnership as determined by leaders affiliated with the Myanmar Baptist Convention? Three emerged. The first of these was that of disaster recovery and compassionate ministry. In the Chin Hills, water erosion caused occasional landslides which were deadly to individuals, animals, and communities. The issue in Kachin State calling for compassionate attention, like that among the Karens, was internal displacement of individuals who become refugees in their native land. A second objective was that of theological education, providing access to theological libraries and supplementing the staff of theological faculties as requested. The third focus was on the needs of the Burmese diaspora who desperately needed discipleship materials for use in Sunday Schools among children and youth. The Burma Work Group began to focus on these three objectives through their efforts and those of their partners.

While the partnership is really quite young, the work group is addressing the objectives placed before it. During 2018, the group began sending teams into Myanmar to address the compassionate ministry needs found in Chin State and Kachin State. In Hakha of the Chin Hills, the group established an experimental water conservation project at Chin Christian University. The group is currently working on a similar project in the New Hakha Division, a settlement begun by people previously displaced by a devastating landslide in 2015.

Another team went into Myitkyina of Kachin State in 2018 to assess the challenges in the Baptist refugee camps located there, especially in light of

challenges to children's education. Deep relationships have been formed out of these visits.

Discipleship among children and youth of the Burmese diaspora across the globe is a second objective. These and their families struggle with displacement and culture shock wherever they live today: Asia, Europe, or the Americas. Members of the Burma Work Group are developing a simple curriculum to address these needs. The curriculum will be distributed through the internet. This effort intends to strengthen local Sunday School teachers, and by extension, to assist teachers in the Burmese diaspora who are spread across the United States.

The focus on theological education to this point is on schools either in Chin State or Kachin State, including Chin Christian College (Hakha), Chin Institute of Theology (Falam), the Judson Bible College (Siyin Region Baptist Association), Kachin Theological College and Seminary (Myitkyina), and Tedim Christian College (Yangon). The leaders of these indigenous schools determine the subjects they desire to be taught in English by Baptists from Washington, D.C. The Burma Work Group seeks to meet these requests with qualified ministers. The students receive the instruction as well as fellowship and encouragement from the teachers. The schools in Myanmar provide gracious hospitality to the teachers visiting Myanmar. After the American teachers finish their presentations, professors and leaders in Myanmar determine the credit given for the lessons and work they received.

The work group is also linking the colleges and seminaries to digital library resources available from across the globe. Finally, members of the work group are helping graduate students in the United States who intend to return to Myanmar to minister in the area of theological education. This latter effort occurs in two ways: through encouragement with funds and emotional support for the potential teachers and in assistance with theses written in English by non-native speakers.

Clearly, various challenges have hampered this ministry over the past year. Before enumerating these struggles, one should note that relationships with the Baptist World Alliance have assisted these partnership efforts in great ways. The friendly reception and affirmation by Baptists in both countries was and is foundational to the partnership these groups celebrate today.

The second cycle of assistance to the Baptists in Myanmar was challenged as the coronavirus pandemic broke out in China and broke into the global news while one volunteer group was traveling in Myanmar. None of that group became ill, but this event was a harbinger of the disruption that the pandemic would bring. The pandemic also interrupted the training activities of the

Burma Work Group working in metropolitan Washington, D.C., as well as their efforts for dialogue, planning, and development of their partnership efforts. The good news is that the work in development of the discipleship curriculum continues to move forward in the United States. Further, some Baptist leaders in Kachin State have requested training and education similar to what the colleges and seminaries received. Finally, the use of Zoom enabled a continuation of teaching in the colleges and seminaries and indeed is broadening that effort beyond local campuses.

One of the benefits coming out of the pandemic is the increased use of digital communication for fellowship, lessons, and study across Myanmar, especially for students far away from the campuses where they usually gather. While presence indeed is desired to build relationship and to facilitate Christian hospitality, Christian ministry can flow digitally, as in Myanmar, through partnership efforts by Baptists. God works in ways which often surprise us but for which we are thankful, enabling us to remain in communication with each other across the world.

Now it is clear that the Burma Work Group faces challenges of social unrest, in both Myanmar and the United States. Time will tell how this affects the work of the Burma Work Group. These challenges have led the Work Group to double its efforts in prayer and to find additional innovative ways to participate with our friends and acquaintances living in Myanmar. Social tensions may at some time interrupt communication between the Baptists of Myanmar and those in Washington, D.C. Still, D.C. Baptists will support our spiritual family in Myanmar in ways we can through individual and corporate means, for God has called us through these once-refugees – now our friends – to help people so pressed and often forgotten. We have gathered at the Myanmar Embassy in Washington, D.C., for a prayer vigil calling for peace, justice, truth, and democracy and were able to include those in Myanmar through Facebook Live. We have also engaged in political advocacy, as we have written two letters thus far to President Joe Biden calling for the USA to be directly involved in peace efforts.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What groups of people living among us as refugees have relatives and friends who desperately need affirmation and ministry but live in other parts of the world?
2. How could we invite Baptists to share responsibly in their call to mission within their own homelands and among their people?
3. What joy might we experience should we give ourselves to God's mission, one which requires both risk and faith, as it takes us into the unknown?

About the Authors



Dr. Trisha Miller Manarin is the Executive Director/Minister of the District of Columbia Baptist Convention.



Dr. Robert D. Cochran previously served as the Executive Director of the District of Columbia Baptist Convention and facilitates the Burma Workgroup for D.C. Baptists.



Equipping Youth and Children to Be Worshippers

Ai Akers | Japan

Since March 2020, we have not been able to gather for worship some Sundays. Currently, as of February 2021, we are not able to gather for worship due to the Otaru City officials' request for its citizens to refrain from going out except for school, clinic visits, or minimal grocery shopping to prevent further spreading of COVID-19.

The deacons and I discussed over the phone how to conduct worship services for the Sundays when we cannot gather at our church building and decided to record the Scriptural reading, a sermon, and a pastoral prayer and broadcast it for those who could watch on the internet. Since there are also those who do not have any access to the internet in our congregation, we mailed the bulletins and sermon scripts to those members so they could worship on Sunday at the same time at home.

At our church, the children's group had just studied about worship in the children's summer camp, so we asked them to take part in Scriptural readings for our worship videos. Their parents recorded their voices as they read the

Bible, and we put that together with some captions. The deacons and I did not have enough knowledge or skills to do everything on our own, so we actively asked younger people in church to help us record sermons, add captions, and edit videos to put them on the internet.

Though the number of children and youth are very few in our church, this change of approach enabled all of them to be involved to some degree in worship preparations. In addition, there were some unchurched people who have never been to our church who now watch the video and worship. They typically had some connections to our church and watch because someone they know was involved in the project.

Although we cannot see each other in person now, our prayer is that those youth and children inside and outside our church will become the worship leaders of the future.

Their relatives near and far also enjoyed listening to the voices of their little ones reading the Bible.

Upon reflection, there are three factors that seemed to have contributed to the development of worship style changes at this transitional time.

1. Our church has been focusing on and praying to minister to and educate youth and children to become good Christians. Their names appear on our monthly prayer calendar.
2. Most youth were happy to be asked to help adults in the areas that they are good in, such as video editing on their smart phones. One youth I called and talked to for the first time, seeking advice in this area, makes a living broadcasting his own video programs on the internet.
3. Connections to neighboring churches across city borders improved. As Otaru City issued a request to limit comings and goings, I as a commuting pastor from a neighboring city could not go into Otaru even for recording sermons. However, the mother church of our church happened to be outside Otaru, so they offered to provide their sanctuary for recording the sermon. A first-grade student at the age of seven recorded my most recent sermon there!

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What steps have you taken or could you take to involve youth and children in your worship services?
2. How could we overcome our cultural norms in order to bring children closer to God?

3. What are electronic devices or apps you already have but are not familiar with? How could you enlist the help of the younger generation to learn more about this technology and how to use it for ministry?
4. What is the history surrounding the birth of your church? Does your church take time each year to remember and recognize the history and intergenerational connections?



About the Author

Ai Akers is the Senior Pastor of Otaru Baptist Church within the Japan Baptist Convention. She is the first female senior pastor in the church's 63-year-history. She studied at Carson-Newman and at the Baptist Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, USA. She loves to read books and listen to music.



Finding Hope in a Pandemic

Darrell Bustin, Ndikumana Gabriel, and Emmanuel Ndagijimana | Rwanda

The year 2020 will always be remembered as the year of the pandemic. It is extremely rare to have an event that touches basically every person on earth. But that is exactly what COVID-19 has done. For many people, that “touch” has meant inconvenience, discomfort, and unwanted change. But for others, the “touch” was more of a “punch” leading to job loss, separation, loneliness, or serious mental health issues. Then there are those whose fragile existence has been pushed to the very brink – and even to death – by the coronavirus.

The reality is that, during times of crisis, it is always the most vulnerable who are hardest hit. They are the ones who have the fewest resources to deal with additional problems, and yet the greatest impact invariably falls on them – just as it has in this pandemic.

But there is hope! In the gloom of the darkness, lights are still shining! In Rwanda, the churches of the Association des Églises Baptistes au Rwanda (AEBR) were closed in March as cases of the coronavirus began to be detected in the country. That meant people could not encourage one another or pray together during a terrible crisis. The absence of offerings meant no money for the denomination that could be used to help those in need. And it meant no income for pastors, which has made it very difficult for them and their families. The good news has been that, in spite of having very little themselves, the church members have been trying hard to support their pastors in whatever small ways they can. However, AEBR became aware of a group of vulnerable people who were being overlooked – retired pastors and widows of former pastors. (Until very recently, things like pensions and life insurance were not thought of or available.)

With the support of Canadian Baptist Ministries, AEBR organized a COVID-19 relief project which reached out to 48 retired pastors and 38 widows of pastors to help them survive these extremely difficult months. During August and September, meetings were held all over the country with these widows and retired pastors, providing them with enough funds to buy two months' worth of basic food items like beans, rice, maize flour, and cooking oil.

During these meetings, the church leaders also used the opportunity to encourage them, knowing that many were very fearful since they had heard the coronavirus hit the elderly the hardest. In order to promote sustainability, they were given flexibility in how to use the money. If they were able, they had the freedom to use some of the money for seeds or to start a small business if that could help them in the future.



One of the beneficiaries of this project is 46-year-old Bertilde. Bertilde's husband had been an AEBR pastor until he passed away in 2005. She was left with five children but no house and no land. They were barely getting by, constantly dealing with chronic hunger. Then the pandemic hit, making their situation even worse. So when she was notified by her pastor that she was going to be receiving help from AEBR, she was so grateful. She already had a long-term plan thought through even before she received the help. She explained, "After getting this great support, I will use half of it for buying food and the remaining half for a small business in

order to get some family income for feeding my kids in future days. When God blesses this support, it will be the base or capital for continuing my small business.”

Bertilde expressed her gratitude to those whose hearts were moved to reach out to others during this crisis: “I want to thank the generous people who were thinking of the vulnerable. May Almighty God bless you and comfort you in your plans forever.” Those are the words of someone who unexpectedly found hope in the midst of a pandemic!

For Reflection and Discussion

1. The authors share how the most vulnerable are usually most impacted during times of crisis. Who in your community has been most impacted by COVID-19?
2. James 1:27 says, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” In what ways are you caring for the orphans and widows in your community?

About the Authors



Darrell Bustin is from the east coast of Canada (Moncton, New Brunswick). From an early age, he sensed God's leading into overseas ministry. Following eight years on the pastoral team at Hillside Baptist Church, he and his wife, Laura Lee, joined Canadian Baptist Ministries in 2002 in order to be involved in church leadership development. The first ten years were spent teaching in a seminary in Indonesia. Then, in 2012, Darrell and his family moved to Rwanda where he works in partnership with the Association des Églises Baptistes au Rwanda doing church leadership development with pastors, church leaders, and those training to become pastors.



Ndikumana Gabriel holds a Bachelors Degree in Agricultural Engineering and a Bachelors Degree of Theology from Grace International Bible University (GIBU USA-College). He served as Food Security Project Manager from 2016-2019 with Canadian Food Grains Bank (CFGB) through the Association des Églises Baptistes au Rwanda (AEBR). He has undertaken various assignments in development projects and agriculture production for alleviating hunger as well as leading and facilitating farmers' cooperatives for development and self-reliance. Currently he is working in AEBR as Director of Community Development and serves as the Evangelism Leader at the Baptist Church in Kayonza.



Bishop Emmanuel Ndagijimana serves with the Association des Églises Baptistes au Rwanda” (AEBR) as the Legal Representative of the denomination. He is married to Marie Mukanziga and they are blessed with five children. Since 1991, he has been entrusted with various roles and responsibilities, including serving as a teacher in Bugesera Bible School and as lead pastor in local churches in Mwogo, Mayange, and Karera. Since 2005, he has served as the Regional Pastor of the Bugesera Region.



From Relapse to Hope

Cristina Arcidiacono | Italy

This month marks one year since the first lockdown. Reflecting on the predicament of churches in the current pandemic, it occurred to me that our being together in this particular time is a new way of embodying church, and in a broader sense, an opportunity of deepening our vocation to be a church through life-giving relationships.

"Psychology of relapse" is how Romano Madera, philosopher and psychoanalyst, describes this time of pandemic. Since March of last year, when all programs, commitments, travels, and schools were suspended, we have shared a tacit commitment to give the best of ourselves, to put energy into solidarity, to live and treat time in a different way, to try to turn the restrictions into an opportunity for new attitudes and new emotional postures. The churches, especially those in the areas most affected at the beginning, have organized themselves creatively. Collaboration, interdenominational cooperation, and ecumenism have characterized the various initiatives, including daily biblical meditations sent via WhatsApp. Online worship services became an opportunity for forwarding thoughts of encouragement to

family and friends and provided simple reflections on how the time of the pandemic could offer individuals and churches opportunity for conversations – enabling us to pay attention to the human hand on creation, to the dynamics of injustice at work, and to the glaring inequalities that have emerged.

Then the summer came. And it gave us the hope that it could bring a new breath of life. Instead, it turned out to be a "relapse." This time it was even more extensive, involving the national territory and beyond, the whole area of Europe and the entire world. Just as the relapse from a physical illness, the relapse has brought the common reactions of tiredness, dissatisfaction, and anguish. What was all this for?

From October onwards in Italy, after a new and hopeful reopening, the churches with the largest and most ventilated premises were able to meet again in reduced numbers, trying to re-imagine the present and the future while churches with small rooms and reduced ventilation remained on digital platforms, looking for the most inclusive ways to gather with as many sisters and brothers around the Word of God.

We go on as we can, perhaps a little more alone, with great expenditure of energy, waiting for what exactly? What are we waiting for? For everything to end? For things to go back to the way they were before?

"I am the resurrection and the life," says Jesus in the Gospel of John. We live in the time of the Risen One. The tiring, and at times distressing, daily life calls us not so much to survive, to save whatever we can, to succumb to the temptation "to retreat to private life," but to recognize that the Resurrection is our promise and our vocation. This Resurrection is renewed for us every day. As individual believers and as communities of faith, we have the certainty that the light of the Resurrection is what allows us to live our life to the fullest, to integrate lamentations, pain, longings and difficulties, even death, in that truth which is the love of God in Christ for each one of us.

For me this means listening to the voices of others, looking at each generation for the gift they bring and the gift they are, recognizing the value of our spiritual relationships, making our individual homes places for community prayer, where everyone although at physical distance can feel united and bound by the Spirit of life.

Indeed, succeeding in keeping our community as loving and united as ever is the best revenge on the relapse syndrome! Considering ourselves part of a larger community which thinks, prays, acts, and does not yield to individualistic temptations, but opens itself to the world is the victory.

Recognizing that either in presence and/or distance, we can cultivate the possibilities of sharing solidarity, of welcoming each other, of serving each other, of recognizing each other ... even in a small rectangle on the screen. Together, regardless of the medium, the place, and the physical distance, we can nurture life for and with each other. The pandemic, or the relapse, has not defeated us!

"My days are in your hands," says Psalm 31. More than with words of resignation, the psalmist turns to God who, like a midwife, holds my days in his hands – the days of each and every one of us. The Lord gives birth to my day, one after the other, and like the expert hands of a midwife, he washes it, removes the confusing varnish, and like a sculptor removes the chaotic mass from it. "O Lord, let me not be put to shame," the psalm proceeds. In the moment I receive time as a gift from the hands of God, the whole attitude about what is happening can and does change!

What does this mean to us? I would like to suggest that the God who holds our time in his hands is calling us to hope.

We live the gift that is the church, the community, this reality that does not belong to us and of which we are a part – beyond any wall or stable, a reality open to the world, a connection that will never fail. Risking hope is the certainty that God has our days in his hands – hands that support, that lift those who are shaky, that comfort those who are afraid. Hands that carry the cross within themselves and announce the resurrection, which calls us to a new and full life that is already before us.

Prayer

Lord, thank you for being among us. Thank you because your Spirit holds this time and this space in which our physical distances become a common table that can hold change, that can stand challenges, that can plan projects and invite reflections – for the present and for the future. Thank you for encouraging us to walk together, listening to each other, nurturing mutual respect, helping us to recognize your daughters and your sons – wherever they might be. We pray for your world, for the many who suffer alone, and for the churches that welcome, support, accompany, and console. Be present with your spirit among us also today, so that everything we do can be a gift of gratitude and an expression of your love for us. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. How have the surges in COVID-19 impacted you emotionally?
2. Do you think “psychology of relapse” is an accurate term? Why or why not?
3. What does it mean to you personally to acknowledge “my days are in your hands”?



About the Author

Cristina Arcidiacono is a Baptist theologian and pastor in Milan, Italy, and a member of the Board of IBTS Amsterdam. She previously served as the National Secretary of the Theological Department of the Italian Baptist Union, and she is also a member of the translation committee of the “Reformation Bible,” a new Italian translation of the Bible.



I Was Hungry and You Fed Me

Brenda Brown-Grooms, Liz Emrey, & Greg Moyer | USA

In 2002, God called us to launch an interracial church for the lost and left out: addicts, alcoholics, ex-offenders and their families. There are 167 churches in Charlottesville, Virginia, but few welcome these outcasts. A group of ten Christians applied to the American Baptist Churches of the USA for support for a new church. God's timing is always perfect! The New Life 2010 initiative had just been established with a goal of "planting 1,010 new churches, reaching 1,000,010 new believers and vitalizing a multitude of caring ministries by the year 2010." The American Baptists offered us \$25,000 and two years of training at the Church Planters' Institute to establish New Beginnings Christian Community.

The Institute emphasized the importance of listening to the needs and gifts of our members and visitors. So when two older women, who were dependent on disability assistance, expressed their concern for the hungry people who came to our worship service, we began offering breakfast. But one meal a

week was not enough. We then asked our members to donate canned goods. When those supplies proved inadequate, Maureen Little Path, a member of the Lakota Sioux tribe, along with her friend, Peggy Mayo, suggested that we join the Blue Ridge Food Bank. The Food Bank is a member of Feeding America, the largest domestic hunger relief agency in the United States, supporting more than 200 food banks across the country. Thus, we began our Food Ministry seventeen years ago.

Every Wednesday, Peggy and Maureen picked up food from the Food Bank and stored it in Pastor Liz Emrey's garage. Our church could only afford to rent a space for worship on Sunday mornings, thus Rev. Emrey's garage was recruited for storing the food in the two refrigerators and freezers donated by Lowe's. At first, 20 – then eventually seventy – people “shopped” for canned goods, frozen meat, vegetables, fruits, and bakery products after our Sunday worship service. Our outreach kept multiplying through word of mouth.

When health concerns were raised about storing food in the garage, we rented a room at neighboring Hinton Avenue Methodist Church. For the next four years, we provided food after our Sunday worship services at nearby Clark Elementary School. Impressed by our expanding number of volunteers and “shoppers,” the Food Bank connected us with Wal-Mart, which donated thousands of pounds of food with an expiring shelf life.

Over the years, we expanded our ministry team to Co-Pastors, Liz Emrey and Brenda Brown-Grooms, and Associate Minister Rev. Gregory A. Moyer. In 2015, we were finally able to fully rent a building 24/7. Our new home in downtown Charlottesville is near a bus line and also has a storage room for our refrigerators, freezers, and shelves for groceries. Along with our enlarged space came donations from Food Lion. We then switched to handing out food on Saturdays to accommodate people from other churches.

Early on, we decided that we would not require any identification so that we could welcome people who were undocumented or homeless. This meant that we were excluded from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) surplus food distribution and needed to rely on grants to supplement our food supply. With God's guidance, we successfully obtained funding from the American Baptist Churches USA's Matthew 25 Grant, Food Lion, Dave Matthew's Band BAMA Works, Charlottesville Area Community Foundation, Carecasters Foundation, Breeden Fund, Aetna, Mercy Fund, and Lowe's. Some of our “shoppers” even donated vegetables from their gardens.

We constantly emphasize that our Food Ministry is an expression of Christ's love for our community. Thus, we encourage our “shoppers” to be givers as well as takers. Many of them bring extra cans and pasta to donate. There is a

real spirit of generosity among the recipients. Everyone is polite and helpful. There is no grabbing or pushing.

Since the pandemic, our Food Ministry has multiplied three-fold. We are now open four days a week serving 300-350 and occasionally 400 needy families. Many people have come to our Food Ministry for the first time. Some of them have lost their jobs; others had their hours cut back. One in six Charlottesville residents – nearly 8,000 people – lacks access to affordable, healthy food. Families have to choose between paying rent, which has gone up 42% in Charlottesville since 2011, or providing groceries for their loved ones.

As news of our Food Ministry has spread locally, we have attracted many new volunteers. Now, not only our church members collect, sort, and distribute the food, but also members from Congregation Beth Israel, The Charlottesville Unitarian Universalist Church, Olivet Presbyterian Church, Christ Community Church and an assortment of non-affiliated Charlottesvilleans. Even the local jail has volunteered to supply us with work-release inmates. This has expanded our understanding of inclusiveness in God's beloved community.

Our volunteers do not hand people pre-packaged bags of assorted groceries because "one size does not fit all." Even hungry people have particular tastes and preferences as well as food allergies. We also do not want to find our donations discarded on curbsides. All the food is laid out on tables in our Fellowship Hall. Following CDC guidelines, with masks and social distancing, our volunteers put the shopper's choices in bags, handing it to them one person at a time.

Not only do our volunteers pick up, set up, hand out, and clean up for our Food Ministry, but they also deliver to the homebound. At the request of our local social service agencies, we are delivering groceries to the low-income senior apartments, several refugee families, and the disabled. Our Food Ministry continues to expand as we listen to every segment of our community.

We also offer restaurant-cooked, take-out meals from World Central Kitchen. In addition, The Enrichment Alliance of Virginia supplies educational toys, which are particularly needed during this time of quarantine. Our ministry keeps growing.

The pandemic has forced our congregation to discontinue meeting in our building. (We have Zoom Bible studies and worship services on YouTube and on our public access television station.) But our church has stayed open and reaching out to people through our Food Ministry. Our worship of God is not just in words and music but also in caring for our hungry neighbors. We have become a beacon of love in Charlottesville during these dark days with a flood

of new volunteers, “shoppers,” and donations from the community, including young people giving us their stimulus checks. We praise God for Maureen and Peggy who listened to God’s guidance to establish our Food Ministry. We pray we can continually be attentive to our members and visitors who are echoing Jesus’ prophetic call, “When I was hungry, you fed me.”

Prayer

Holy One,

In this age of pandemic, when a lie is told as the truth and the truth is suspected to be a lie, we know you have asked us to feed the hungry, to care for the poor, lonely, and afraid. You have sent us to be your representatives, your light in the world. Use our arms and feet and ears and eyes and intelligence and hearts to care for our brothers and sisters and the other creatures upon the earth – indeed the earth itself. Let us not fail to be faithful to you, to others, and to ourselves. You reward faithfulness, it is true. But truer still is your abundant love for us. Our grateful, feeble response is to attempt to love others as you love us. Let us feed others and care for them and help when and where we can. We trust that when we need help, you will send brothers and sisters to help us as you send us when needs arise. Thank you for entrusting us with Kingdom work. We say Amen in the matchless name of Jesus, who is the Christ.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What are the needs of your visitors and members? Are you willing to listen to those with new ideas to serve your community, regardless of what their social or economic status is?
2. How do you preserve the dignity of the people you serve?
3. The BWA affirms, “We are called to love one another. By this, we demonstrate that we are Christ’s disciples. We believe that true unity and fellowship can never be achieved until relationships move beyond acknowledgment of and respect for the other and toward care and concern.” How does your church show care and concern for your whole community, including people of different denominations and faiths? Do you welcome non-Christians to work with you, demonstrating to them the meaning of Christ’s love?
4. What organizations in your community can you partner with in serving your neighbors in need?
5. How has the pandemic affected your community? Has it caused you to begin new ministries or expand your present services to the needy?

About the Authors



Dr. Liz Emrey was ordained by American Baptist Churches USA (ABC) in 1978, receiving her Doctorate of Ministry from The School of Theology at Claremont in 1980 and also studying at Yale Divinity School, the University of Virginia, and Shalem Institute. She is the founder and Co-Pastor of New Beginnings Christian Community.



Pastor Brenda G. Brown-Grooms graduated from the University of Virginia and Union Theological Seminary, having also studied at Vanderbilt Graduate School of Religion. She has pastored in New York, Tennessee, and Virginia. Her ordination in 1991 is recognized by both the General Baptists and American Baptist Churches (ABC). She now serves as Co-Pastor of New Beginnings Christian Community.



Dr. Gregory Allen Moyer is a biochemist, writer, painter, ordained American Baptist Churches USA (ABC) minister, and Associate Minister of New Beginnings Christian Community. He holds a doctorate from Penn State University and from Amherst Theological Seminary (VA) in Old Testament. He has written 26 books on the history of ancient Israel.



Initiatives in the Church Amidst the Current Situation in Japan

Sasauga Okumura | Japan

At my church (Fukuoka Baptist Church), all meetings except for the Sunday worship, prayer meeting, and deacons' meeting have been cancelled due to the spread of COVID-19. We encourage attendance at our Sunday services by all except the elderly, those with underlying medical conditions, and those with fever on the day of the service. As a result, since last April, worship attendance has been about half of what it used to be (about 20 people). In addition to streaming the service online on the day of the service, we are also distributing audio data and CDs containing the audio of the service. Due to problems with the internet and a limited number of service staff, we are only able to provide a very unstable service, but we are doing our best.

In the midst of this situation, we are very thankful that we have encountered several people who are interested in the Bible and Christianity and have come

to our church for the very first time. One of them asked to learn more about what is written in the Bible, not only in worship but also interactively. At present (February 2021), our Sunday School classes have been suspended, and the effects of COVID-19 are not likely to end for some time to come. So with infection control measures in place, there is a movement to start personal Bible studies. Instead of just listening to a sermon in worship and accepting the words of the Bible passively, we need to create an environment conducive to questions. We are regaining the lost art of dialogue. I feel as if I have seen the essence of Sunday School. It is a great loss to have less time for dialogue about the Bible, and if the current situation of not being able to have Sunday School time continues for two or three years, it will have a great impact on future church formation.

Last July, there was a torrential downpour in Kumamoto Prefecture, near Fukuoka Prefecture, and one of our church members was affected. He was running an architectural office, and his office was covered in mud. Eighty-four people died and four are still missing from this disaster. Just like our church member, many people needed a helping hand, but due to the COVID-19 situation, there were fewer volunteer workers available who would cross prefectural borders to help. Therefore, since August last year, I have been going to Kumamoto on a regular basis with the pastor of our church as well as seminary students and pastors from other churches to volunteer through cleaning and demolishing houses. Every time I go to Kumamoto, I realize there is an overwhelming lack of disaster volunteers compared to the size of the damage. Most of the people affected by the disaster are cheerful and energetic, but they seem to have great anxiety about the future. In such a situation, the number of COVID-19 infected people in Fukuoka Prefecture where we live has risen since the beginning of 2021. We decided that moving across the prefecture to Kumamoto to help would increase the risk of infection, so we have now stopped this activity. A small group of staff from Kumamoto is continuing to work in the area. Those of us who live in Fukuoka Prefecture are praying and waiting for the resumption of activities.

At Fukuoka Baptist Church, we have been preparing to start a "Children's Cafeteria" in response to the recent increase in the number of poor families in Japan and the increase in the number of households with two working parents. The plan was to have a pre-opening in 2019 and start once a month in 2020. However, since we cannot have a congregational dinner right now, we are working on distributing food provided by the food bank at the church about once a month. Dozens of people have received the food each time. At the same time, we are preparing for the future by purchasing a large refrigerator and a large number of plates. We are setting them up in the church. We are also considering making and serving lunches.

In the wake of the recent spread of COVID-19, there are many theological issues with which Christians within and outside the church are being challenged. Where is the Kingdom of God that Jesus showed us spreading to? What feeling have we been walking in? In Matthew 9:36, Jesus looked at the crowd and had deep compassion for them. This compassion is described in the Greek as σπλαγχνίζομαι. This means "to be moved as to one's bowels, hence to be moved with compassion, have compassion (for the bowels were thought to be the seat of love and pity).⁴⁴ It was out of this compassion that Jesus sent his disciples to further expand his ministry. The question now is, "How have we walked with this compassionate heart?" In terms of "activities," we may have said and done many things. While we may have talked and done many things as "activities," were those activities for activities' sake?

As Jesus's compassion is a strong feeling, we too need to walk with a feeling that shakes us up. Now that many activities and meetings have been canceled in the church, we have been given time to think about what the Gospel is that we share with our neighbors. In order to do that, we must first have the Gospel resonate in ourselves. I believe that at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus is his compassion. The proclamation of the Kingdom of God is something that God himself does, and we participate in it. At the center of the mission of the Kingdom of God are those who have nowhere else to go and are suffering the most. We are small and weak, but we still need to receive Jesus's compassionate heart and follow him.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. In the past, the church has been evangelizing, but what has been at the center of that evangelism? Have we ever been expansionist or managerialist?
2. Have we or have we not been satisfied with the busyness of our activities?
3. What kind of attitude did Jesus have toward people? Are we listening to the needs of those outside the church in a way that reflects Jesus?



About the Author

Sasagu Okumura was born in March 1979 in Osaka, Japan. After graduating from Carson-Newman College in the USA in 2002, he worked as a graphic designer in Tokyo for 14 years. In 2018, he entered the School of Theology at Seinan Gakuin University. He is currently a first-year student in the Master of Theology program.

⁴⁴ The Online Greek Bible (<https://www.greekbible.com>)



Light in the Dark, Tiny Room

Asha Sanchu | India

It was just like any other day – humid and sweaty but the traffic was quiet, and the usually crowded and noisy place looked weary and deserted. The city I live in was on total lockdown due to the pandemic. Vehicle movements were restricted, and business timings were very limited. But as one in social ministry, I got the permit from the authority to extend support and help to those in need. On this particular day, I wanted to go and check out how my friends in the booze joints in the red-light areas were doing. As I walked down the small dark alley which is seldom noticed or used by many people, I saw one woman I know with a broken leg seated in this small joint overcrowded by men. There was no social distance, no masks, and it looked like these people were not bothered by the pandemic.

The woman I met usually worked as an entertainer/server there. But I hadn't seen her for quite some months, so when I asked where she had been and

how she was, she told me how she had broken her leg and had to go back to her family for help. We continued our conversation, and I could feel all eyes staring at me. Some stopped drinking and others kept smoking. The smell of the smoke, the booze, the sweat, as well as the smell from the drainage just outside was so strong that it was making me feel sick. I saw this look of “get out fast” in the eyes of the joint owner and the playful looks in the eyes of men. No one asked me to sit and the room was so small and packed that I was literally standing just by the door. My head told me to get out from the place as quickly as possible, but my heart told me something else. In my heart, I felt strongly I needed to pray for this friend. I saw that need, that longing, and that desperation for prayer, love, and acceptance in her eyes. It was then I chose to listen to my heart.

I silently prayed to God for courage and then asked all the people in this packed tiny room if it was okay to pray together. I then saw this “What?” look in the eyes of some, but many said in unison, “Okay, we are very happy.” Then, all of a sudden, this tiny dark room environment changed. Some took off their hats. Some pushed their glasses aside getting ready for prayer. Some threw away their cigar. Some took out the tobacco they were chewing, and in a few minutes, everyone was ready to pray. The lady who is the owner of the booze joint, to my surprise, stopped what she was doing and happily said yes for prayer. It was magical as we prayed together. Prayers were heard in different languages loud and clear. We all forgot we were in one dark room in one of the darkest areas of the city at a very difficult time. Many of the prayers I didn’t understand, but I heard many mentioning COVID-19. I knew it was from their heart. I was tempted to open my eyes and see them and I did. I had never seen anything like it. A few security staff on patrol stopped to see what was happening for prayers from a place as this is never expected. These same men will start drinking, smoking, gambling, speaking abusively, looking at women lustfully and so on, but I saw one thing in common in each of them – their desperate need for God.

It was evident that the people in that room needed Jesus as much as I do. After the prayer, it was amazing to see each of them trying to get out from their tight corners and shake hands just to say, “Thank you.” I didn’t ask them anything. The only thing they asked me was why I was there. I told them that I work with people in the red-light areas and in the streets, and I just came to check if they were okay and hand over some basic essentials. To my surprise, each of them took out some money and placed it on the table and gave it to me, asking me to help a family really in need. I knew they would be disappointed if I refused. So I humbly accepted and also asked them if they wanted to assist me in the distribution. Two of them agreed to help me. I handed a mask to each of them and walked out. I could see a grateful look in their eyes saying, “Thank you for not being judgmental, not preaching at or

teaching, but being accepting and loving them as they were and considering them worthy to pray together for a friend in need of prayer.” All this happened just standing at the door.

As I walked out, I was asking myself, did that really happen? What a delight to be his light! I may never get to meet those men again, but I know well in my heart that for many the meaningful fellowship we had in that tiny room will remain one beautiful memory. My heart also tells me that out of the many men there, one or two will remember that day as their last one there as they have seen, understood, and accepted the need for Jesus in their lives.

All through the lockdown as I go out to serve and see and meet different people, I am always overwhelmed by the great need and how limited we make ourselves because of fear. This pandemic has taught me all the more that as the Church, we cannot just wait for people to come to us. It is even more evident today that we need to take the Church out to the world – to those dark alleys and tiny rooms. The Church has done much, is doing much, but there’s a pressing need to do more.

“The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. So, ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field.” Amen.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. How is God calling you to meet people where they are?
2. Who can you pray for today?
3. What is an example of a time when God gave you courage?
4. Where have you seen Jesus recently?



About the Author

Asha Sanchu's passion and call is serve God among sexually exploited girls and women. She strives for justice and to economically empower the people she serves. She currently serves as the Director of Miqlat Ministry, a social faith-based ministry under the Nagaland Baptist Church Council in Nagaland.



Rethinking What It Means to “Gather” the Congregation

Nathan Nettleton | Australia

At the South Yarra Community Baptist Church (SYCBaps) in Melbourne, Australia, moving worship and congregational life online during our city’s four-month hard lockdown proved so successful that there is now a serious conversation about the possibility of continuing it and not returning to physically gathered worship.

This is particularly surprising for us because our worship over the last two decades has been richly sensory and sacramental with a strong commitment to embodiment. We did not anticipate it adapting well to an online format.

What people say they value most about our worship is its radically participatory congregational style. Every regular participant has parts of the Sunday service that they lead, usually from where they are sitting. For most of

a pre-COVID worship service, there was no one up front. Everything happened from within the circle, and everyone had a part to play. This meant that when we went online, the common practice of pre-recording or live-streaming footage of a few key leaders conducting a service from the church would have been a big turn-off for our people. It simply would not be “our” worship. We needed to find a way to “gather” the congregation online for a real-time, live, participatory event in which everyone could contribute to making the worship happen. We knew we would have to give up some things, but the congregational participation level was non-negotiable.

Gathering on the Zoom platform and screen-sharing slides with texts, music, and visual imagery enabled this for us. Using Zoom’s side-by-side mode allowed people to see both the slides and most of the congregation at the same time. The texts of the prayers and songs that people usually had in a booklet now appeared on the slides. Each person knew which numbered slides were theirs to lead and could unmute themselves to do so. To our amazement, this replicated our previous experience remarkably well.

Some things had to be adapted more than others, and some adaptations had surprising consequences. For example, it had been our practice to follow a general confession of sin with an individual absolution in which each person turned to the next, marking the sign of the cross on the neighbor’s forehead and telling them by name, “Your sins are forgiven. Be at peace.” Thus, the absolution was passed right around the room to each person in turn. How could we replicate anything like this online? Our solution was to use Zoom’s spotlight feature to highlight each attendee in turn, so that the rest of the congregation could, in unison, tell that person that their sins were forgiven. It lacks the dimension of touch, but people can mark themselves with the baptismal sign of the cross as they are told of their forgiveness, and those gathered in small household groups can still mark one another.

What we slowly realized was how important this component of our worship was for achieving a sense of being truly gathered in one another’s presence. One of the problems with online worship for many churches is that since most worshippers are only the receivers of streamed footage that they can watch at different times, it is difficult for them to avoid engaging simply as consumers or spectators. There is a legitimate question about whether going online hasn’t so much caused this as simply exacerbated and exposed something that was already happening in our church buildings. But certainly online, as a viewer, you know that the leaders are not aware of your individual presence, and your absence would make no difference to what happens. But for SYCBaps, in our online gatherings, even if you are a first-time visitor and do not have any parts to lead, when your image is spotlighted and you are addressed by name by the whole congregation, assuring you that you

personally are forgiven by God, you are also receiving an unmistakable assurance that your presence is noticed and honored as important.

In the first few weeks when I was frantically busy trying to prepare all our worship materials for this new format, I freed myself from sermon preparation by inviting a few visiting preachers online. We quickly realized that this opened up the opportunity to have visiting preachers from all over the world without having to wait for them to visit our shores in the flesh. Not only has this enabled us to build stronger connections with other churches around the world, but we have been able to hear firsthand reports of how the pandemic was impacting other countries and how the churches in those places were adapting.

Zoom also gave us the means to gather people during the week for prayer and mutual support, something that was obviously going to be more important than ever during months of enforced physical isolation. With our congregation scattered across a large metropolitan area, we had not previously been able to gather people regularly for daily prayer. Lockdown intensified the need and Zoom provided the means. Within a few weeks, in addition to our main Sunday service, we had another 18 short prayer gatherings a week – morning, late afternoon, and nighttime, six days a week.

At the time of writing, we have been out of lockdown and mostly COVID-19 free here in Australia for three months, but attendance at these daily prayer gatherings has not waned. About half the congregation attends at least once a day, and about three quarters at least once a week. Not only is that a lot more gathered prayer than was going on before, but after each of these gatherings, most people stay and chat with one another. Much of the congregation is spending far more time in one another's company than ever before, sharing both small-talk and deep concerns. Paradoxically, the physical isolation of lockdown actually brought us closer together! A number of people have said that these daily gatherings saved their sanity during the months of lockdown.

As the months went by, more unexpected benefits began to emerge from this new manner of gathering, and this is where our story begins to move from one about the church's worship, fellowship, and spiritual formation to one about new possibilities in mission.

The first thing we noticed was that the numbers at worship were up. The long-term regulars became more regular. Some of this was just that during lockdown, people felt their need for connection more, and there were few competing activities and not much else to do. But it wasn't only that. There were people whose increasing age and declining mobility had been making it

more and more difficult to get themselves to church each week and who found the online worship far more accessible. Suddenly they were there every week again. Others who had moved away permanently or temporarily began rejoining us again because distance was no obstacle. In one amusing case, a young woman who had moved overseas for twelve months and was a bit anxious about missing her church for so long actually only missed one Sunday before we had to move online and she was able to rejoin us from the other side of the world!

Over time we have identified five distinct groups of people who have been significantly advantaged by our move online (in ways that are not specific to lockdown), all of whom have not previously found church working well for them:

1. People whose mobility is diminished by age or disability. This includes many who are confined to long term care facilities.
2. People with disabilities that limit their ability to connect in the physical environment. For example, one long-term member has impaired vision and hearing. In the church building, when everyone is leading prayers from different parts of the room without microphones, he cannot hear very much. Online, he can turn up the sound as much as he likes and can magnify parts of the screen when he needs to.
3. People who live in remote localities that may not have access to a church.
4. People whose lifestyle means that they are often in different places from week to week.
5. People who are living interstate or overseas who want to worship with us.

There are, of course, people for whom the online worship is more difficult, and who hunger for a return to physically gathered worship. Most notable among those are people who spend too much time on Zoom for work, and those with young children who particularly miss the physical activity and physical interaction that cannot be replicated online.

But we are now facing a dilemma. Attendance from the five categories above has grown through the year so that now if we terminate the online gatherings, we will be casting adrift nearly half the congregation. And although our unique style of worship adapted surprising well to the online environment, it would be very difficult to make it work with a hybrid of the online and physically gathered. For both technical reasons (such as needing to make every person in the church building audible to those online) and liturgical reasons, there is a very real danger that trying to create a hybrid will

significantly diminish both versions of the experience and simply create the worst of both worlds.

So the pressing question is: Is there a new call of God emerging in our recognition of these five people groups who are benefitting from our online worship and congregational life? Knowing that it is not possible for any congregation to be all things to all people, is God calling us to accept the cost and refocus our ministry and mission toward these identifiable groups of people who have not found church sufficiently accessible in the past? We're not yet sure, and the conversation has a long way to go.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Taking worship online inevitably involves change, and some things have to be sacrificed. Given the longstanding Baptist commitment to the congregational nature of church life, how could we reshape our online worship service so that it encourages the active participation of the congregation?
2. In some churches, people said their ongoing engagement in congregational life and worship was the thing that got them through the crisis of lockdown. Other churches are beginning to fear that many people will not return because when they most needed their church, it was not there for them. What could be some of the contributing factors for these two divergent phenomena, and what could your church learn from it?
3. Has your church noticed there are some groups of people whose engagement with the life, prayer, and ministry of the church has increased or been enhanced by the new patterns that have emerged during the pandemic? Are they similar to the groups named in this article? Or could you name other such groups?
4. SYCBaps Church featured in this article is actively trying to discern God's calling to them regarding which people group they should focus their future ministry on. Has your church engaged in an active discernment process before? Or during the pandemic?



About the Author

Nathan Nettleton has been pastor to the South Yarra Community Baptist Church in Melbourne, Australia, since 1994. He is a member of the BWA Commission on Worship and Spirituality and has written and taught extensively on Christian worship practice. He lives with his wife, daughter, and two dogs.



Teaching Children to Persevere During the Pandemic

Seketuno chase Punyü | India

I am a mother with young children, and we love to attend church and Sunday School regularly. I really became aware of the importance of Sunday School during the lockdown period when children and adults alike were unable to worship together at church. We received video lessons to show and narrate to our children at home on Sunday mornings during the normal class time, and at home we had such warm fellowship as a family – something we have been neglecting for so long. My children learned to pray for the needs around us, and we learned memory verses together as a family, among which were Psalm 23 and Proverbs 3:5-10.

One particular Sunday message, which we thoroughly enjoyed and felt such reassurance of God's hand in the beginning of the pandemic, was from Genesis 50:20. It taught us that God allows seemingly bad things to happen to us with which we struggle and go through pain, but it all happens for his

glory to shine through. Joseph had to go through a series of harsh circumstances in his life, but God kept him under his care to lead him to save his family and a nation during a devastating famine. So what others do with the intent to harm and destroy, God turns around to bring about beautiful things again. For some, we see that instantly, while for others we wait to see when we are finally at rest away from this world. This unfortunate pandemic season is a difficult time, but we see the hand of God in bringing about beautiful things too. It is truly a time for us to find our hopes in him alone.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. How do we as parents view the fact that the lockdown forced us to spend time teaching our children, whether teaching them regular school subjects or teaching them the Bible? Have we ever considered this to be a blessing?
2. Have we ever considered that this devastating global pandemic could be used by God for good? Could you name some good that God has revealed in your life during this difficult time?
3. Everyone's experiences during the pandemic can become the source for a testimony and teaching point. What experiences do you have that could be shared with others?



About the Author

Seketuno chase Punyü is a Montessori school teacher. She is married to Keni and is the mother of two children (ages 7 and 5). They make their home together in Dimapur, Nagaland, India.



The Church and the Response to Crisis: Working with Migrants

Manuel Castillo Purizaca | Peru

The First Evangelical Baptist Church of Lima is 68 years old. On its 64th Anniversary, the church was confronted in its vision with the arrival of Venezuelan migrants. The question that arose in the face of this challenge was: is it possible to apply the principles we teach? The church evaluated its biblical theory in the face of Venezuelan migration. For example, how should the church apply Matthew 25:31-46; Luke 10:25-37, the parable of the Good Samaritan, and James 2:14-18? The church, with much fear, decided to open the doors of its building to shelter homeless individuals and families.

This is how the "Ministry of Love" came about. This ministry aims to answer the question – what would Jesus do? Everything we do is in that direction, considering what the Gospels teach us about how the Lord Jesus dealt with the vulnerable of his time.

The priority of this ministry is to provide migrants with lodging, food, and clothing and to support them in the areas of health and education. At the same time, we give them spiritual assistance, teach them the good news of salvation, listen to their problems, and serve them.

The church soon realized that the Lord had brought us an important group of migrants. They have now been ministered to with the Word of God; we have witnessed decisions of faith; we have baptized; and other brothers and sisters have requested to be members of the church. Something important to highlight – during the lockdown, churches were not allowed to hold face-to-face services. However, through the Ministry of Love, we have a captive population with whom we share the message of the Gospel through our example by giving them lodging, food, and care.

The migrant-refugee comes to us with a lot of grief and needs. They have left their homeland, family, children, traditions, and employment. They consider that many things have failed: their government, their economy, the loss of their jobs, etc. But they have learned that the Word of God remains forever and that Jesus is always there to meet their needs. Thanks to God we have incarnated the Gospel. Thus, the next step is to create the First Ethnic Baptist Church.

GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1. As a church, we are committed to provide a style of discipleship that embodies the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by attending to the needs of the most vulnerable, and in this way it will be a reference for other churches.
2. To create the First Ethnic Baptist Church through this style of discipleship.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To provide three meals a day to a population of sixty people.
2. To get a partner to help us with food to feed sixty people.
3. To create a social venture, which we have called "Common Pot," through which we will sell lunches at an affordable price of two soles a meal. Clients will be the migrant population not housed in the Ministry of Love, which has been affected by the lockdown imposed by the national government due to the resurgence of COVID-19. Most of them are unemployed; others have been evicted from the rooms where they lived.

4. To get a partner to support us with the investment to prepare 100 lunches a day and funds to provide food baskets.

WHAT HAPPENED DURING THE LOCKDOWN FROM MARCH 2020 TO DATE?

1. We have been able to continue providing three meals a day to 60 guests.
2. We have also delivered lunches to an external population that exceeded eighty lunches per day.
3. We have delivered over 800 food baskets to families who do not live in the Ministry of Love.
4. We have shared daily devotionals with the guests, and we continue with this spiritual work.
5. We wrote logs to the church, reporting to them on the day-to-day tasks of serving our internal and external guests.
6. We were able to preach the good news of salvation almost every day of the week. We discovered it was not necessary to have a pulpit to preach the Word of God on Sunday. This way of preaching continues. The streets near the church building became the pulpit, and the homes of the people who receive humanitarian aid are the recipients of the message. We also preach virtually to a population that connects to social networks.

EXPERIENCE OF ACCOMPANIMENT

We have accompanied the migrant-refugees in their mourning. The pastoral office with the support team has been with them and with the external population during the 76 days of the first lockdown. Without resting, we have given accompaniment, obtaining resources to serve them in the areas of health, food, clothing, and money to send to family in Venezuela. We have had the opportunity to serve the guests of Ministry of Love every week in my office, helping with their crisis of loneliness or worries because they were left without a job. During the lockdown, two babies were born and a third baby went to surgery because of hydrocephaly. In all these cases, we have accompanied the parents in their search for solutions.

LESSONS LEARNED

During the lockdown, the church discovered that the COVID-19 pandemic left the country with five major challenges:

- **Unemployment.** The economy slumped, leading to unemployment. Many migrant-refugees lost their jobs, and this produced anxiety and fear. The

church coordinated with the respective authorities to get help while the country's economy is re-established. We are working to produce commercial ventures that may help to create jobs.

- **Evictions.** As there were no jobs, evictions abounded. Families were left in the street. Some of them have been received at the Ministry of Love.
- **Hunger.** Unemployment produces shortage of income, which results in tables without necessary food for children, teenagers, and the whole family.
- **Sickness.** Poor nutrition has produced many diseases. In addition, a high percentage of the migrant-refugee population cannot access the health system.
- **Death.** All of the above has led to the death of many migrant-refugees, and the family is confronted with the need to find financial assistance to cremate or bury them. We have helped families to find resources.

These five realities have led us as a church to look for partners and friends to help us to be relevant in this reality the world is facing. Our testimony has been known by non-believing friends who have contributed to this cause. It is interesting that they have received the Word of God, not in a revival or through a sermon from a pulpit on a Sunday, but they have seen and heard us preach with facts. Likewise, some churches and Christian organizations have supported us as well as brothers and sisters in the faith. But the demand is great. The number of vulnerable persons is increasing every day, and we need more help to undertake great things for the Lord.

GOOD PRACTICES FOR THE CHURCH

The First Evangelical Baptist Church of Lima will never be the same after this pandemic. We are convinced that God opened a door of opportunity for us to serve, embodying the Gospel we preach. Our church building has become the center of operations to serve the needy.

Something very interesting that I must point out is that the church discovered that it did nothing to have more than forty people, including children, youth, and adults within the facilities of our temple. The Lord sent them. We discovered that in his grace and mercy our God considered us worthy to serve his cause, to serve the newly born.

We are very close to launching the First Ethnic Baptist Church of Lima, taking into account the population that we have housed in our building. The pastor could be a brother who was one of our guests. He is a graduate from the Baptist Theological Seminary of Venezuela.

To conclude, I quote John A. Mackay, "Strategy without reflection is fanaticism, but reflection without strategy is the paralysis of all action."

For Reflection and Discussion

1. How did Jesus minister to the most vulnerable?
2. The author writes about the fear the church experienced in beginning a new ministry. In your life and ministry, what emotions have you felt when the Lord leads you to start something new? How did you respond?
3. What steps can you take right now to "embody the Gospel" in your context?



About the Author

Manuel Castillo Purizaca was born in 1951 in Peru and currently serves as the pastor of First Evangelical Church of Lima. From 2010-2014, he also served as the Director of Missions and Evangelism for the National Baptist Convention of Venezuela. He has also served as a pastor and church planter in Venezuela and the United States. He is married to Irene Mego.



The Church Is Sharing Our Burden: The Response of the Lebanese Baptist Church to Syrian Refugees

Joe Bridi and Sophie Nasrallah | Lebanon

Since the beginning of the war in Syria which began in March 2011, the Baptist churches in Lebanon have been responding to the major influx of Syrian refugees to their country. In just two years, by the end of 2013, more than 800,000 Syrian refugees were in Lebanon, a country with a population of only five million people at the time.

Before the start of this crisis, only a small number of Christians took an engagement stance with challenges facing their society. However, the sense of mission is changing in Lebanese Baptist churches. They have demonstrated a willingness to enter into the opportunities God is putting before them by addressing several key challenges, two of which include the challenge of attitudes toward an enemy and the challenge of practical logistics.

Regarding the first challenge, many church members remember the invasion of Lebanon by Syria in the 1970s. It is estimated that between 1976 and 2005, Syria had between 20,000 and 40,000 troops on average in Lebanon. Church members remember loved ones who were mistreated and even killed by Syrian soldiers. Now, the Lebanese were being asked to care for their enemies.

Regarding the second challenge, the church quickly developed an infrastructure which included seeking out dedicated people with particular expertise. They invested in the relief and community development arm of the Lebanese Society for Education and Social Development (LSESD) called MERATH – Middle East Revive and Thrive. Its mission is to empower local churches and organizations to implement relief and development projects for thousands of displaced and vulnerable families in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.

We believe that it is through caring for the whole person that we best incarnate the ministry of Christ, who both fed the hungry and offered his body as the bread of life, healed the sick, and preached forgiveness of sins. It is in the context of relationship and community that our church partners are able to be authentic witnesses to our vulnerable neighbors, unconditionally serving each according to their needs.”⁴⁵

Brother David oversees the ministry among refugees in a local church that is part of the partnership with MERATH. Every month, the church provides food vouchers to 300 households and diapers to about 200 families with babies. They also distribute blankets and winter items to around 700 households this past winter. Vocational training is also a part of their initiatives. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, about 700 hygiene kits and emergency food assistance have been shared. The crises in Lebanon have continued with the aftermath of the Beirut explosion and the economic hyperinflation. Food vouchers and shelter rehabilitation are now part of the activities of response. Brother David states:

What keeps me going is seeing the fruits of our ministry. Because we are a church and not any organization, we witness drastic changes in the lives of the people we serve – changes in their personalities and in their perspective about Christianity and Christians. But what makes me the happiest is seeing someone new give his or her life to Jesus as an indirect result of our work.

⁴⁵ <https://merathlebanon.org>

And we have seen a lot of this in the ten years we have been ministering in our community.”⁴⁶

Dalila (*pictured at the top of the article*) is one of the recipients of the ministry of MERATH through Brother David and the church. She has seven children – two girls and five boys ranging in age from 11 years to the youngest who is only three months old. They are from the Hasakah region in Syria where they lived in a nice neighborhood, owned their own house, and lived with their in-laws. Her husband worked as a driver, and they had all they needed.

In 2013, they decided to flee Syria and seek refuge in Lebanon. Shortly after fleeing, they received news that their house had been destroyed by a bomb. A snowstorm would not allow vehicles to pass so they walked for several hours to get across the border. They went to live in one room at Dalila’s brother-in-law’s home.

Eventually, Dalila’s husband was able to find a job as a day-laborer, and they were able to rent a small room in a basement. She sold the little gold she had, all for the purpose of caring for her children.

Relatives told her about the nearby church that was helping families in need. She had never set foot in a church, but she felt very welcomed. She met brother David and other people who treated them very well and helped them with all the assistance they could. She received food vouchers, milk, diapers, and many other things. Her two youngest children still wear diapers and drink milk. She needs about two packs of diapers for each child every month and a pack of milk every two days for the older one. Sometimes she leaves her 1.5-year-old daughter without diapers during the day so she can save some. “Brother David thinks about us every time the church receives diapers!”

During this pandemic, things have become much more difficult, but the church continues to support them and share their burden. During the lockdown, her husband had to stay at home and could not work anymore. The price of food, milk, and diapers has increased greatly because of the devaluation of the Lebanese pound, and paying rent is more difficult since there is so little work.

Dalila is very thankful for Brother David and for everyone who has given to make the assistance possible. She asks that we pray that the schools would

⁴⁶ <https://merathlebanon.org/2020/09/15/there-is-no-hope-except-in-god>

reopen so her children can continue their education, that they can find more work, and that God would shorten these difficult days.

(Note: Sophie Nasrallah, Communications Manager at MERATH, has written and posted Dalila's full story on [MERATH's website](#).)

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What are the benefits and drawbacks of partnering with agencies who are aligned with the vision and mission of the church's ministry?
2. When was the last time that God asked you to love your enemy? What did it take to obey, how was God honored, and how were you affected?
3. Not many of us would think of diapers as being such a powerful vehicle of grace and love. What kind of surprise offerings of grace and love have come your way recently?
4. The Baptist churches in Lebanon are learning to match their verbal proclamation of the Gospel with demonstrating unconditional love to those who used be their enemies. To what extent are these churches demonstrating integral mission?

About the Authors



Joe Bridi is based in Beirut, Lebanon, and works with Canadian Baptist Ministries' local partners. He develops strategies for ministry and provides support to graduates of Arab Baptist Theological Seminary who are launching ministries in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region. Joe has a heart for people and serves Syrian refugees in his area by leading Bible studies and discipleship groups.



Sophie is in charge of Communications at MERATH. Sophie graduated with a degree in Political Science from Paris and worked for several years in the communications field in France before feeling called to move to Lebanon with her husband Wissam in 2017. Sophie has two children, ages 5 and 2, and feels blessed to have the opportunity to raise them in Lebanon despite all the challenges the country is facing.



The Impact of COVID-19 on Churches in Nigeria

Oladeji Adebayo | Nigeria

Unarguably, the emergence of the dreaded coronavirus has turned the whole world upside down. Even if the pandemic disappeared today, the world will no longer be the same. No more handshakes, no more hugging, no more gathering of the crowd of any form – be it social, political, or religious. Wearing face masks has become part of dressing. No doubt, it is one pandemic too many. Many have gone to early graves as a result of COVID-19, and everyone is praying hard for the end of the pandemic.

COVID-19 has no respect for the government, the governed, the business community, the rich, the poor, the mighty, the lowly, and the church is not spared. At first, the pandemic was regarded as a problem of the western world until it entered Africa through Egypt, and gradually, it spread across the continent. In the beginning, churches in Nigeria continued with their normal worship, praying for an immediate end to the pandemic in Europe and the United States. But like a thief in the night, it entered the country, and the government declared a lockdown order that forbade social and religious

gatherings. The government agency, Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) coupled with the Presidential Task Force, is at the forefront of the public health response to the COVID-19 outbreak in Nigeria.

Then the crisis snowballed into lockdown, churches were shut down, and church leaders began to look for alternative ways to worship the living God. Big churches with private television stations have little or no problem as their leaders preached directly to their members in their homes, and they also joined others in making use of online services thanks to social media. Members were asked to buy data and watch online services, and offerings and tithes were collected through e-banking. But as a result of the level of illiteracy, many Christians were disfranchised from worship due to unreliable power supply and ignorance of information technology. Others could not afford the cost of weekly data.

The government at all levels is struggling to live up to expectations. The recently held #ENDSARS protest was a direct reaction of the masses to the hoarding of the foodstuffs meant for the masses. The Christian body has been consistently asking churches to provide food items, money, clothing, beverages, and drinks to Christians and non-Christians. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) itself has donated the same to the federal government with a view to assisting the poor. Both the big and the small denominations have been assisting the people, either to complement the government or to assist where the government has been failing. For example, the Nigerian Baptist Convention has donated various foodstuffs, beverages, and drinks to state governments and sent goods to impacted members in other affected states.

Churches such as Dunamis International Gospel Centre in Abuja reportedly donated medical equipment worth millions in Nigeria's Naira to the Federal Capital Territory Administration to support the effort of the government to stop the spread of coronavirus. The church also donated food items, toiletries, clothing, and other items to orphanages and the less privileged. Among the items donated were bags of rice, clothing items, noodles, vegetable oil, beans, fish, yams, and many other items.

Others churches whose donations are worth mentioning are Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) led by Pastor Enoch Adeboye and Living Faith Worldwide popularly known as the Winners Chapel. The former donated medical supplies to the Lagos State Government to support its efforts in equipping medical staff with the necessary protective gear needed to contain the coronavirus pandemic. The items include 8,000 hand sanitizers, 8,000 surgical face masks, and 200,000 hand gloves. Similarly, the Living Faith Church Worldwide donated ambulances, test kits, and personal protective

devices (PPE) to the Lagos and Ogun State governments to assist in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The Catholic Church in the country also donated palliatives and went further to release some of its hospital outlets to the government, but regrettably they were not used.

To reduce the risk of infection in places of worship, Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) gave the following guidance:

- There should be no entry without facemasks. All attendees and religious leaders must wear a face mask.
- People who are sick should not go to places of worship. There should be temperature screening on entry.
- Handwashing facilities and hand sanitizers should be provided at points of entry and strategic points.
- Attendance at religious settings should not exceed 1/3 of seating capacity.
- Religious centers should be clearly marked so that people sit and maintain two meters distance from each other.
- There should be no form of direct contact. Practices such as handshakes as peace signs are discouraged.
- Practices that require sharing of materials should be limited. For example, ablution should be performed at home.
- Religious centers should be disinfected routinely, before and after worship.

No sooner had the churches reopened when some churches returned to their previous ways of worship, violating the protocols of the pandemic. The government threatened to shut down worship places again, and the leadership of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) had to quickly preempt that by issuing a directive to its members to follow COVID-19 protocols or risk sanctions. This was contained in a press statement dated January 18, 2021.

In the statement released by the Association's General Secretary Joseph Daramola, CAN warned that COVID-19 is real and deadly, saying all its members must follow all necessary safety protocols, including "no entry without facemasks." Other guidelines included in the statement were:

- No entry without facemasks. CAN said all worshippers, including the worship leaders, must wear face masks. There should be no exceptional cases.
- There should be temperature screening at every entry point to the church.
- Ensure adequate ventilation in halls of worship, open windows, and doors for air to circulate.

- Handwashing facilities and hand sanitizers should be provided on church premises.
- Practices that require sharing of materials should be limited.
- Every church should make use of medical personnel to assist.
- Church auditorium should be clearly marked so that people sit and maintain two meters distance from each other.

There was a storm in late December 2020, and some state governments vowed not to allow the popular Crossover Night. Many churches said they would not obey the order, regarding it as hostile and ungodly. Again, the CAN leadership intervened and urged the government to relax the order and urged its members to ensure the COVID-19 protocols were strictly followed.

Worship places cannot remain the same, even after the pandemic is over. However, among the gains of the pandemic is the emergence of online services among many churches and the virtual offering of programs and meetings. For example, the annual gathering of the Nigerian Baptist Convention was held virtually last year, and the annual Workers Retreat was virtual again this year. The Redeemed Christian Church of God has also been consistently holding most of its programs virtually until recently when it combined physical attendance with virtual. Its monthly gathering that attracted millions of people has been suspended until further notice. It is the wish and dream of Christians throughout the country that the pandemic becomes history to enable them to return to their former way of worship.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What role should the Church play in collaborating with local governments to meet practical needs within the community?
2. What protocols and processes have you implemented in order to make in-person gatherings more safe?



About the Author

Oladeji Adebayo, an ordained Baptist clergy of University Baptist Church in Gwagwalada, Abuja, also doubles as the Spokesman for Rev. Dr. Samson Ayokunle, Nigerian Baptist Convention President.



The Mission of the Church

Deiser Campos | Peru

To speak of the church is also to speak of the mission that she herself has. Whoever can speak of her must sense the awe of the weight that the church carries, the record that their life from conversion to where they have lived has shown in deeds – what many times in words is too complex to express ... the mission of the church. I have to speak of the mission where I find myself immersed, being part of the very body of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Church. I grew up in a Christian home in a town called Upata in Venezuela, one of those small and colorful towns where I used to see my parents serving the Lord.

I know a lot about the church and its language. I have had the privilege of traveling and learning about other cultures and other churches, and believe me, we are all the body of Christ. I am saying this because I think the mission remains the same wherever you may be. The form may vary, but the essence remains the same.

In 2017, I wanted to leave Venezuela due to its bad situation. I had several options of places to migrate, but wherever the place might be, I had the firm intention of being used by God and his church. We never imagined that it would be in Peru, this beautiful country where the Lord would allow us to migrate for a purpose beyond our own personal interests.

Moving on to the question of faith, in the book of Matthew 28:19 is the Great Commandment. For me, it is not a question of religion but of the faith we have deposited in whom we have believed. This leads me to meditate on the previous verse (v.18b): “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.” This command given by God himself has between the lines God’s own power and sovereignty over everything that exists, both in what we see and what we do not see. He himself who has the keys that open and close doors has given the church the privilege of extending this beautiful Gospel with the responsibility and weight of a teacher because we must teach others to keep all those things that God has commanded us. The task of the church is simply to do the mission: the how and where will also be given by God because the work is his in the same way that we are those who love and follow him.

Do we have a Church in the middle of a crisis or a crisis in the middle of a Church?

This is a question that could come from a bench or from the platforms that nowadays we utilize to congregate, a question that can challenge us with its answer found in the word of God. Even if the boat (in the ocean) moves with great force, thus scaring the crew, God is still calm. We cannot deny the storm or the crisis because it is real. It might have taken us by surprise, but in the same way as the disciples of our Lord Jesus did, we raised our hands above our heads and called him and he gave us calm in the middle of the crisis. This has given us the strength to move forward.

We are a small three-year-old church that is growing in a sector that many do not speak well of. We have the privilege of sowing this powerful seed of the Gospel of Christ. To do the mission of the church in a context of crisis has been hard and an uphill challenge with the many restrictions in place, such as not being able to hug each other, because we are meant to seek love and give love. How do we tell people that God is still God when circumstances seem to deny Him? In the midst of everything, we have been learning and we have been seeing how the hand of God has sustained us. The small place where we congregated, which was the living room of the house of some brothers, could no longer be used. Due to the pandemic and the quarantine, we could not even leave the house, so the best resource was prayer and waiting for God’s directions.

We began to work with the technological tools we knew and had available while trying to make it simple so that everyone could participate, and we saw how God integrated everyone and even added others. How good is the Lord! We preached the Gospel in the same way, and we created a discipleship group called AES (social spiritual care). These same people later received food weekly for more than three months until they could return to their jobs. We were experiencing the integral Gospel in the community.

Then we began to congregate outdoors in a park. We had to fight against the many distractions of the place, but right there the Lord brought us people interested in His restoration of the family. We call ourselves Grace and Truth Baptist Mission. During these three years, we have seen 12 people get baptized, convinced that Jesus is the Lord and that there is salvation in him.

The local church, the mother church, has to adapt itself when God makes it clear that temples are not necessary. What is necessary is to go out and spread the Gospel because the more people believe, the more heaven rejoices. The way we do discipleship has changed. It has been a challenge to transition from the living room of a house to a hospital, to make a long phone call, or in other cases creating discussions in the workplace about how to know more about the God we adore.

I firmly believe that the church must transform and aim to do the mission in an integral way, that the aspects of daily life are not alien to it. It is customary to work with a broom to clean the streets in the same way you would clean and dry the tears of a heart that needs consolation. These are special times, and we must find a clever way to leverage it as much as possible in order to reach the goal and fulfill the call to make disciples.

How fortunate will our church be when we hear, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' (Matthew 25:23)

I end by concluding with the answer to the previous question:

Do we have a Church in the middle of a crisis or a crisis in the middle of a Church?

From my perspective and based on my life experience, my answer is that we have a Church in the middle of a global crisis that has the assistance of God himself who has all the authority both in heaven and on earth. With him and for him, we continue going as God's church and his body with the mission of doing an integral work in the lives of those around us. God moves in ways that transform, and his sovereignty is above all.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What obstacles has your church had to overcome in an attempt to be outside the traditional walls of the temple?
2. What are practical ways to do mission in an integral way so that they are part of daily life?
3. Reflecting on the last year and a half, has your church been a church in the middle of a crisis or have you had a crisis in the middle of your church? What lessons can be learned by honestly evaluating your response to COVID-19?

About the Author

Deiser Campos was born in Venezuela and grew up watching his parents serve the Lord in church. God ignited in him a burning desire to take the Gospel wherever he went, and even as a child he loved to hear a person accept Christ as Savior. Currently he studies theology at the Baptist Seminary of Lima (SEBAL) and serves at Ebenezer Baptist Church while planting Grace and Truth Baptist Mission. He is married with two sons and a daughter.

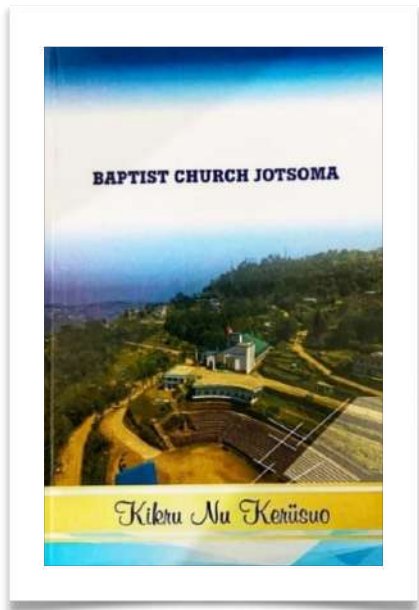


The Mission of the Church: Evangelism and Discipleship

Nirie-e Nisa | India

Before the pandemic, Jotsoma Baptist Church (Nagaland, India) used to have thriving Sunday worship services. Approximately 1500 members would come together and fellowship each Sunday. But once the lockdown was imposed, the church could not meet for 30 Sundays.

Online services were arranged but since the setting was in a village, many did not have the means to participate in the new mode of worship. It was in this context that the home visiting pastor of the church began to write short and simple sermons and print them out. Some volunteers would help deliver these printed sermons to about 500 families before Sunday. Soft copies of these sermons were shared to members and friends through WhatsApp.



Many families would fellowship together on Sundays, pondering on the sermon. Some read it during their family prayer meetings and more enthusiastic members even read it on a daily basis throughout the week! This continued for 28 Sundays as members continued to appreciate and encourage this act of evangelism.

Finally, the sermons were compiled in a book entitled “Kikru Nu Kerüsuo” (Worship in the Family) and is being distributed to anyone who would like to read it.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What are creative ways you have sought to connect with those who do not have access to technology during the pandemic?
2. How has your family grown together spiritually during this season? What resources have helped you the most as you have worshipped within your home?



About the Author

Nirie-e Nisa is committed to have the mind of Christ. She wants God to be glorified in the knowledge that she knows Him personally and seeks to live by Micah 6:8. She currently serves as an Executive Engineer in a state government establishment.



The Strategic Place of the Local Church in Global Relief

Julia Bowering | Canada

Early in 2020, a news headline in an East Asian country reported that a religious community was “actively participating in epidemic prevention and control work.” A portion of the article includes this summary:

“In this time of crisis, Christian believers under the leadership of a local pastor are showing their dedication and love to the people, undertaking the risk of being infected with the virus in order to participate in the first-line prevention and control. The pastor uses the church’s van to transport emergency supplies to those in need. During this city-wide quarantine, when people are under strict isolation rules, Christians showed that though the virus is being isolated, their love is not isolated, giving much needed basic living materials to low-income families in need.”

Indeed! The generous and risky relief response of Christian believers in the region where the world's first COVID-19 lockdown is newsworthy. It all started with prayer. Unable to leave their houses and check on the vulnerable members of their community, these pastors began to pray together. When a local government official's car broke down, he called one of these pastors and asked to be driven to his destination. Equipped with a temporary permit and the church van, this pastor stopped at every roadside farm stand, purchased as much produce as the van could hold, and made deliveries to his city's most vulnerable families. Before long, governing officials had equipped other pastors with vehicle permits, and one of the first COVID-19 food relief projects commenced.

With limited resources, they approached their partners in ministry, Canadian Baptist Ministries, to contribute to their efforts. Together, they responded to four groups of people:

- **Group A:** The regular group of poor families the church had already been serving. Eighty-seven families each received a pack of rice, a bottle of oil, vegetables, some masks, a heater (for those in need), and some cash.
- **Group B:** People visiting relatives in the area for Lunar New Year holiday and being confined meant they had run short of money to sustain their daily living. Thirteen families each received rice and oil from church.
- **Group C:** Fifty poor migrant families and their children were working in construction and restaurants. Their jobs were lost due to the outbreak.
- **Group D:** Thirty families of pastoral staff in the city and villages all faced financial problems. They were living in the lower income area and received very minimum support from the local church during normal times. Since all churches were closed, very little offering was received. These servants of God received some cash as well as some rice and oil.

This successful initiative drew on the local knowledge of the pastors involved as well as their ability to collaborate with one another, with local governing officials and with international partners eager to provide support. In addition to that, it drew on their faith in God's action and invitation to mission. This prayerful approach, combined with contextual knowledge and a collaborative spirit, made for an impactful emergency response. By the end of this project, 270 families were fed and kept safe while 43 people came to the faith for the first time.

The response of this faith community highlights the strategic place of the local church in global relief. As churches grow in their understanding of integral mission, merging their spiritual care with care for the whole person and community, they set themselves up for rapid response in times of crisis. Agencies and denominations can begin by encouraging the development of a holistic theology of the mission of God.

Secondly, the response also reveals that capacity building for relief and development can and should happen at the local church level as well as the denominational or agency level. At Canadian Baptist Ministries, we observed that during the lockdowns, our smaller, volunteer-led denominations responded more rapidly and with greater flexibility than our larger partners with relief and development offices. These local churches were already used to hands-on participation in the denomination's activities and were quickly dispatched and equipped for pandemic relief.

And finally, their response highlights the importance of fostering opportunities for collaboration and networking. Global networks such as the Baptist Forum for Aid and Development (BFAD) provide opportunities for agencies around the world to coordinate their efforts and ensure local churches are supported in their relief efforts. This not only avoids overlap, but it also provides opportunities for local churches to learn from new relationships and locate their efforts in a global context.

The local church, equipped and called by Christ to participate in the in-breaking Kingdom, is uniquely placed to respond to our world's largest crises. We have seen this during the COVID-19 pandemic as local churches responded with prayerful, contextual, and collaborative relief. By supporting practical capacity building at a local church level, as well as providing continued opportunities for international collaboration, local churches around the world will be well-equipped to respond in times of great need.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. The church leaders of this faith community had a relationship with government officials prior to the crisis, one that allowed for contact to be initiated during a vehicle break-down. Would the government officials in your area consider your community as a source of assistance? Why or why not?
2. Do you agree that all three elements listed are required for effective emergency response: "This prayerful approach, combined with contextual knowledge and a collaborative spirit, made for an impactful emergency response?" Are there additional elements that ought to be considered?

3. The Baptist COVID-19 response strategy describes the church as “locally led activist communities” uniquely positioned to provide transformative global relief (Baptist Forum for Aid and Development, “Global Baptist Coronavirus (COVID-19) Response Strategy 1.0” April 22, 2020, Page 2). Would you or would you not describe your church as a “locally led activist community?” Why or why not?
4. The Baptist World Alliance’s Commission on Mission desires to nurture “a passionate commitment to Gospel witness within the BWA and among Baptists worldwide. It identifies, discusses, and shares available analysis of the ever-deepening understandings of the mission of the church in the world today in obedience to the Word of God.” How does this story of the response of this faith community meet the commission’s objective?

About the Author



Julia Bowering is the Team Lead of International Programs for Canadian Baptist Ministries. Her education is in rural community development with experience living and working in East Africa. She also holds a Master of Divinity and spent a number of years working with local congregations as an ordained pastor with the Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec.



Under Military Coup: The Church's Struggle, Spiritual Formation, and Social Work in Myanmar

Name Withheld for Security Reasons | Myanmar

The coronavirus was first found in Wuhan, China, in November and December 2019. Since then, it has been transmitted to millions of people and killed millions of lives. In Myanmar, more than 130,000 people tested positive for the virus and more than 3,000 people died of it.

On February 1, 2021, the military seized power and detained U Win Myint (the democratically-elected president) and Aung San Suu Kyi. More than 800 peaceful protesters have been killed, and more 3,000 students, professors, teachers, doctors, and artists have been detained. Thousands of professors, physicians, and teachers who participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) were terminated from their jobs. People now suffer from both COVID-19 and military dictatorship.

How should Christian churches in Myanmar respond?

CHURCHES DURING THE PANDEMIC

Churches in Myanmar struggle for their survival spiritually, economically, and socially. Christians cannot worship in churches because churches are closed to prevent the infection and transmission of the virus. They follow social distancing disciplines. Some Christian families worship in their homes. Some do not worship at all. Pastors visited their houses and administered the Lord's Supper.

In Myanmar, a few pastors and evangelists defied the rules and disciplines and conducted a worship service that resulted in the transmission of the coronavirus to about fifty persons. For this disobedience, they were sued in court.⁴⁷ Some rejected quarantine disciplines because they were ashamed of being affected and being quarantined. Some disliked being quarantined and being isolated because they believed they were not affected. Some felt that exposing their illness caused their family shame and a loss of honor.

During the Christmas season, some villages celebrated Christmas as usual while in city churches celebrations were muted. Last year, the Christmas celebration was a family Christmas. Before COVID-19, Christians celebrated Christmas at churches and had community meals together. But in 2020, Christians who celebrated Christmas shared packed lunches they brought to their homes and ate as a family. It was a difficult time for large fellowship gatherings.

Christian youth led by the Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC) served at quarantine centers as volunteers. It was the Gospel in action shown to the community. Christians also served food to quarantine centers in Phaung Gyi and North Okalapa Hospital. Young people did not hesitate to work in these centers and hospitals. On April 27, 2020, the Myanmar Council of churches teamed up with a volunteer group. Many young people registered to serve. On May 19, 2020, youth from the Roman Catholic Church and other churches joined the volunteer team. In Pyay, churches provided food to people living in quarantine centers. Local churches donated masks, food, and other items to people who were affected.

From March to May 2020, the churches were closed. In June and July 2020, churches, Christian organizations and theological institutions realized that it was impossible to wait for the COVID-19 vaccine. They started to hold worship services, meetings, seminary training, and school classes via platforms like

⁴⁷ They Irrawaddy, "Myanmar Pastors Face Prosecution for Defying Ban on Religious Gatherings Amid COVID-19, The Irrawaddy, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/specials/myanmar-covid-19/myanmar-pastors-face-prosecution-defying-ban-religious-gatherings-amid-covid-19.html>.

Zoom and Facebook Live. They also collected offerings in Zoom worship services. Online worship services became our spiritual practice and channel.

THE MILITARY COUP

However, on February 1, 2021, the military seized power and detained the president, ministers, and some political activists. They cut off internet connectivity and banned Facebook and Messenger. Churches could not hold online worship programs or gather via Facebook Live. Online classes and worship were interrupted. On February 3, the military junta allowed access to the internet only to cut it off again. On February 6, while I was teaching my students, just before it occurred, a message was received saying, “Military juntas would cut off the internet connectivity.” Many theological institutions and Christian churches (Roman Catholic Church, Myanmar Baptist Convention) released statements condemning the seizure of power and the military coup, but some were silent. As of now, we do not know how church gatherings and theological training will look going forward.

SPIRITUALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

Spirituality is a huge concept that can embrace many perspectives. It can be defined as the “motivating force driving people for religious quest, ethical activities, psychological wellness and even social transformation.”⁴⁸ Another definition is related to people’s “thoughts and beliefs, rather than with their bodies and physical surroundings.”⁴⁹ The last definition means a way of life.

“The ascetics pray for God’s forgiveness and transformation of the society. They practice ascetic life to heal the community spiritually. Ascetics are compassionate and empathic. We set ourselves aside in a peaceful attitude looking to God for guidance, understanding and acceptance. We do our best to love and recognize others, to see the likeness of God in them, learning to tolerate, even to accept, them in compassion. Prayer and silence are always inclusive; they never act divisively or exclusionary.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Description of International Conference on Spiritual Leadership and Social Transformation, Department of Cultural and Religious Studies, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Joint program of Asia Academy of Practical Theology, Divinity School of Chung Chi College, Chinese University of Hong Kong.

⁴⁹ “Spiritual” Collins Coubuild Advanced Learners’ Dictionary, New 8th Edition.

⁵⁰ Norris J. Chumley, “The Compelling Spiritual Discipline of Asceticism,” Dec 06, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-value-of-asceticism-t_b_806700. Chumley, is a bestselling author, Emmy award-winning executive producer/director, and professor. He has recently completed a feature film and book, “Mysteries of the Jesus Prayer.”

St. Gregory the Great I (590-604) gave all his properties to the poor and practiced ascetic life. Later he became the pope of Rome and took on the role to repair the city. In his time, Rome faced “flood, food shortage, and plague. He provided food to the poor.”⁵¹ Despite being monastic and ascetic, they served the community. Epidemic context requires social isolation as much as it does in taking care of the sick. Isolation or staying home is a way of life in fighting against the coronavirus. The purpose of social distancing is to protect the community from the virus. Ascetic way of life supports social distancing disciplines when it serves the community in whatever way possible.

SPIRITUALITY AFTER FEBRUARY 1, 2021

Spirituality of churches and Christian organizations in February was evidenced by public demonstrations of protest and prayer for political stability. Cardinal Charles Maung Bo of the Roman Catholic Church called for a peaceful transition of power, nonviolence movement, and for the release of President Myint and Aung San Suu Kyi. Some churches prayed for change in the country. Many families held worship every night specifically for this situation, praying for the release of the president and all the political prisoners.

Thereafter, every night after family worship service, we joined the taan-pone-tee (beating drum plates and trays) campaign, which traditionally signifies casting devils and demons. This also sent out the message and implied the belief of the protestors that the military dictator Min Aung Hlaing, who governs the military and caused the coup, is controlled by demons and devils. At our home, we too beat drums and trays at 8:00 p.m. to cast out devils. In other cities like Yangon and Mandalay, many Christian young people participated in demonstrating against the military coup and joined the people movement. I participated in it, and I saw some Christians join the demonstration in my city. This became one of our wider ecumenical movements in Myanmar.

CONCLUSION

As Christians, we need to pray to God for our country, and we also should be aware that obeying quarantine and social distancing rules is an expression of prayer and worship. At the same time, they need to participate in the movement of protest. We pray not only for COVID-19 patients, physicians, and nurses but also for political stability. Under the military coup, worship could no longer be conducted online. Instead, the family became the center for worship service. These are ways through which Christians are keeping their spirituality during COVID-19 and political instability.

⁵¹ *A Concise History of Christianity*, 111-112.

Our future looks dark. We are like the person who is walking in darkness without any light. We do not know what the future will look like, but God is our hope, light, and refuge. Please pray for us and for our country.

For Discussion and Reflection

1. What benefits are there to families for homes to become the “center for worship”?
2. The author sees the observance of quarantines and social distancing as expression of worships. What are your thoughts on this supposition?
3. How will you stand together with the people of Myanmar in prayer at this critical time? Resources are available at BaptistWorld.org/myanmar.



Victorian Baptist Churches on a Mission for Innovation

Daniel Bullock | Australia

The following story shows how innovation, a missional lens, and the church all combine to bring about a praxis (a theology that is embodied and acted out) that adds enormous value and impact within the lives of not only congregational members but also the wider community.

This indeed is a summary of what we know as “missiological ecclesiology.” Huge words which really imply that the church is a “sent church” – its essential nature and vocation is one that is called and sent by God.⁵² In other words, it seeks to look outward as it continues to take concern for the discipleship of those who are gathered, with a view for forming them for mission.

⁵² D.L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

Theologians tell us that all biblical theology is missional theology, and that as the church, we read the Word always through the incarnational and missional lens of a God who is in essence missional.⁵³

Our Baptist Union of Victoria lens of innovation describes innovation as follows: “Change that adds value.” The following influential formula has also been helpful for understanding missional innovation and imagination: “Christology Determines Missiology Determines Ecclesiology.”⁵⁴

In other words, the churches we love, attend, and to which we give our time, gifts, and energies are part of God’s instruments in redeeming the world. Churches are based on Christ and are foremost missional.⁵⁵ Our God is a creative, innovative, present, and surprising God, and through His Spirit brings about change that adds value particularly as it has an outward focus on mission.⁵⁶

And the best thing about all of the above and what you will read following is the church becomes more passionate, excited, and released into all that God imagines for it!

STORY

In the early hours of one Sunday morning in early October 2020, seventeen cars carrying a total of twenty-nine people drove up on the loose gravel driveway of Epsom Community Church in rural Bendigo, Victoria, ready and excited for the week’s Sunday service ... and not a single person needed to come out of their cars.

Christian believers all over Victoria, Australia, have been feeling the impact of the COVID-19 lockdowns with strictly enforced in-person meetings and limits on indoor gatherings. It became harder and harder for churches to gather and fellowship with one another as issues of cleaning, contact tracing, and the risk if someone were to be infected halted any possible progress. But there is a certain resiliency and innovation behind the leadership team at Epsom Community Church, a group that did not see these limitations as a halt in

⁵³ G. Hill, *Salt, Light and a City: Introducing Missional Ecclesiology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012)

⁵⁴ A. Frost and M. Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Books, 2003)

⁵⁵ C. Van Gelder and D.J. Zscheile (eds.), *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011)

⁵⁶ Scot Cormode, *The Innovative Church: How Leaders and Their Congregations Can Adapt in An Ever-Changing World* (Baker Publishing: Grand Rapids), 2020

progress but as an opportunity to make something seemingly impossible possible.

With the church leadership team being privy to the congregation missing their weekly Sunday fellowships and seeing their greater church family, they got together and hatched a plan that would make this possible: their first “Drive-In Church Service” – and all without breaking a single lockdown rule.

Households came together in their cars where they formed a semi-circle arch around Head Pastor Kelvin Niblett who shared the message from his outdoor pulpit stationed on the church steps. Comfortable, safe, and within sight and reach of each other, together the Epsom Community of believers listened to the Sunday message of hope, broadcasted to every car present through a low-frequency selected FM radio channel.

The church continued its Drive-In Church run, bringing in even more people in its second week before extending its broadcast operations online using Facebook and YouTube so that other members who were unable to join the Drive-In Church could tune in. Contingency plans were put in place in case of weather changes with Pastor Niblett moving inside the church building where he could safely (and comfortably) transmit and record the service. Afterward, members could either head home or go to a local park to sit around in small groups for Bring-Your-Own (BYO) lunch picnics and chats, making the most of seeing each other and fellowshiping with one another.

Apart from church services, Epsom Community Church also utilized the innovative use of the FM radio transmitter to host an Annual General Meeting with the entire congregation in December. The Church’s Secretary said, “By the [AGM], my friend will have sorted a smaller antenna, and all will be in a portable bag and run off a motorbike battery. Thus, we hope the chairperson will be able to walk to our people in cars (or in their groups of 10 as per the restrictions) and people can ask questions, give comments, which can be heard by everyone on their FM radio.”

Fellowship and communal worship have always been at the heart of the Church as it says in the book of Acts 2:42: “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.” The pandemic may have limited the ways in which the Church can come together in person, but the innovative actions and adaptability of the Epsom Community Church’s members have been integral in maintaining not only the important spiritual practice of worship and fellowship but of friendship, care, and love shown to one another – especially at a time when everything was so uncertain.

The response of this Baptist faith community to the limitations brought on by the pandemic highlights two very important characteristics of the local church – innovation and adaptability. As churches continue to grow in their understanding of the importance of congregational fellowship in their spiritual formation, finding ways to make things work is not as difficult anymore, particularly given the various affordances of the digital age that we are currently living in – whether that’s through a Drive-In Church Service every Sunday or through a Zoom Bible Study where one can stay connected and feel a part of a community and church family even when unable to do so in person.

Drawing upon the Epsom Community Church’s innovative workaround of congregational fellowship under the limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Language Other Than English (LOTE) churches around Victoria have also come together to face the generational tension between the first and second regarding the knowledge and resources that are required for innovation and adaptability to occur.

A Chin community church in Victoria responded to this tension by not only acknowledging the technical prowess of the younger generation but by encouraging them into understanding that using their skills and knowledge to innovate and respond to issues that arose during the pandemic is one to be proud of and admired – knowing they are being used for the flourishing of the church and the good of one another. And to the Baptist Community all over Victoria, this has been a successful feat that will continue for many years to come, even when the pandemic is no more.

Diana Taw from the Werribee Karen Baptist Church said, “If you are a person who loves going out, staying home every day is really hard. But our youth are fighting hard and tried their best to stay connected to our church. Seeing them coming to youth service on Zoom made us really happy ... I felt like God is preparing something good for us during this difficult time, and all we have to do is keep going without complaint. I believe that nothing is impossible when we put our trust in God.”

For Reflection and Discussion

1. In what ways can you see your church/ministry becoming more passionate, excited, and released into all that God imagines for it in the midst of a restrictive crisis like COVID-19 or another crisis?
2. What has been your best means of connection with your community during the pandemic?



About the Author

Rev. Daniel Bullock has served as the Director of Mission & Ministries at the Baptist Union of Victoria (BUV) since 2012. He previously served as the Senior Pastor at Essendon Baptist Community Church, a position he held from 2007-2012. He also worked at NewHope Baptist Church for 11 years as the Senior Associate Pastor where he served in a number of roles, overseeing a large staff team and diverse ministries. His key strengths are in the areas of strategy and staff development, preaching, teaching, and coaching emerging leaders.



PRACTICAL GUIDELINES



APBAid Response Framework and Resource Toolkit

Roshan Mendis | Sri Lanka

With global resources stretched, this is the time to draw on our Baptist values of locally-led, activist communities. Asia Pacific Baptist Aid (APBAid) has developed a toolkit as a resource to support conventions, unions and churches seeking to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The possible practical actions provided in this toolkit can be replicated and adapted as local church responses to the outbreak of COVID-19 in their respective regions.

This toolkit aligns with the global Baptist COVID-19 response plan to “Strengthen, Lead, Respond, Defend, and Advance.”

These five dimensions clearly merge with the three United Nations (UN) strategies and activity outputs of Containment, Reducing Deterioration and Protecting, and Assisting and Advocating for the most vulnerable.



**BAPTIST
WORLD
ALLIANCE**

STANDING TOGETHER GLOBAL RESPONSE PLAN

FIND OUT MORE: BaptistWorld.org/covid19

OUR MISSION

Networking the Baptist Family to Impact the World for Christ

OUR RESPONSE

Mobilizing Global Resources in Response to the Needs

YOUR PARTNERSHIP

47 Million Baptists Standing Together for Maximum Impact



STRENGTHEN
Worship, Fellowship & Unity

PRAYER INITIATIVES

- 24-Hour Prayer Marathon
- Standing Together Prayer Video Series
- Weekly "Baptists One in Prayer" Email Update
- Global Prayer Request Network



LEAD
Mission & Evangelism

MISSION INITIATIVES

- Church Resource Sharing
- BFWED* Grants



RESPOND
Aid, Relief & Community Development

AID INITIATIVES

- BWaid Grants
- Networking Global Agencies through BFAD**
- Pastoral Encouragement and Support
- Information Sharing (Website, Webinars, etc.)



DEFEND
Religious Freedom, Human Rights & Justice

HUMAN RIGHTS INITIATIVES

- Global Religious Freedom Monitoring
- Healthcare Services Protection Monitoring



ADVANCE
Theological Reflection & Transformational Leadership

LEADERSHIP INITIATIVES

- Horizons Online Training in Multiple Languages
- Crisis Care Chaplaincy Training (research phase)



PRAY

Commit to stand together in prayer.



GIVE

Offer financial support to combat the global pandemic and respond to needs worldwide.



LEARN

Share resources to better equip the global Baptist family.



RESPOND

Engage your gifts to further our worldwide mission.

* Baptist Fund for World Evangelization and Discipleship ** Baptist World Alliance Forum for Aid & Development

It is designed with the understanding that churches, communities, and families are key in this response. In aligning ourselves with these global priorities, we also meet global standards and present ourselves as a good model of best practices in such a time as this.

To conform to global humanitarian standards, the overarching framework of response is based upon the UN's Global Humanitarian Response Plan (Global HRP) 1 and articulates three strategic priorities:

1. Contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and decrease morbidity and mortality.
2. Decrease the deterioration of human assets and rights, social cohesion, and livelihoods.
3. Protect, assist, and advocate for refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), migrants, and host communities particularly vulnerable to the pandemic.

USING THE TOOLKIT

Access at: <http://bit.ly/APBAidToolkit>

This resource toolkit (is intended to provide churches and conventions with a pool of resources and ideas of responses and best practices drawn from around the region that may be replicated and utilized. The responses are presented as a “menu” that each implementing body can choose according to context, need, and capacity – serving as a guide to formulate their individual responses within their nations.

It then provides a segmentation of activity output phases for each priority according to Prevention, Emergency, and Recovery as pictured in the table below. It includes both psychosocial wellbeing tools, in addition to a section of resources for theological reflection and a guide for online worship as well as a wide variety of program resources. The toolkit is collated under three main sections of Church, Family, and Community responses and program ideas for each UN priority. All the above resources are uploaded on an accessible drive (see link below) in three folders named:

1. Church
2. Family
3. Community

UN Global Humanitarian Response Plan Priorities		
Prevention / Awareness	Emergency / Immediate	Recovery
CHURCH RESOURCES / TOOLS		
FAMILY RESOURCES / TOOLS		
COMMUNITY RESOURCES / TOOLS		

The matrix below captures how the above framework has been arranged as well as provides a few examples. This framework is an example of how you as a church or convention may align your activities with the global priorities. The activities are broadly categorized as Prevention, Emergency, and Recovery.

An example is given under each section. It is also presented as a framework to design a plan of action that would include either one or more of the UN Global Humanitarian priorities, be focused on particular activity outputs or multiple outputs, and address needs by targeting church action, families, or community.

UN GLOBAL HRP PRIORITIES	1. Contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and decrease morbidity and mortality. 2. Decrease the deterioration of human assets and rights, social cohesion, and livelihoods. 3. Protect, assist, and advocate for refugees, IDPs, migrants, and host communities particularly vulnerable to the pandemic.		
Activities and Outputs	Prevention / Awareness	Emergency Response	Recovery
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PPE distribution • Awareness material 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food distribution to vulnerable • Medical assistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restoration of livelihoods • Psychosocial work

We suggest that as you look at your program of activities, ensure it is carried out by:

1. Reviewing local needs.
2. Reviewing available resources.
3. Designing an appropriate response.

To make the most of this toolkit, we recommend that you look through it all and then return for specific resources as you develop your overall response. The toolkit brings together resources from around the world to provide ideas, guidelines, and reflections on the new reality we find ourselves in.

Find a collated repository of tools in the Google Drive:

https://drive.google.com/open?id=1nyKMye7ZhIJ0w530yYGXuQ_kwZkx9kas

NOTE: The resources may be adapted to each local context as appropriate. Please give due credit and acknowledgment to sources when translating.

All of the resources, over 150 of them, are available online in a separate drive. To guide you to what is available, two indices are linked below and available for download:

Weblinks: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PSMgt1roncMz2_Fzj2em-Uynljl3gNOJ/view?usp=sharing

Article Index: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZPMZGb5RmUK7-hjMa9vNKXndUmP0YZpy/view?usp=sharing>

For assistance or clarification, please feel free to reach out to roshan@apbf.org or shereen.apbaid@apbf.org.



About the Author

With more than 25 years of experience in the field of aid and development, Roshan Mendis is the Director of Asia Pacific Baptist Aid (APBAid). Having served hands-on in grassroots and management environments, Roshan is a sought-after resource person in development practice, particularly in the areas of Integral Mission and Advocacy, and a preacher and teacher.



Church and Crisis Response: A Story of Victory and Adaptation to the New Reality

Nivaldo Aparecido Cavallari | Brazil

The First Baptist Church of Paranaguá, founded in 1903, is the first Baptist Church in the state of Paraná, Brazil. It currently has 450 members (370 in the headquarters and 80 members in the three church campuses) in the city of Paranaguá. There are 12 more Baptist churches in the city. It is a church with a contemporary mindset, seeking a balance between Baptist tradition and modernity, and has a collegiate ministry.

In early 2020, before the pandemic reached Brazil, we had no idea what was coming. Our services were broadcast by cell phone to Facebook, targeting especially the deaf community – something very simple. The children's service happened simultaneously with the church service, and during the week we had activities for several organizations and ministries (women, elderly, youth, deaf, music workshop, and the rehearsals of the choirs and worship groups). Financially, we were coming out of a crisis that hit the churches in Brazil in 2015, bringing down contributions to almost twenty percent.

In March 2020, in the middle of a campaign to raise funds for World Mission from the Brazilian International Mission Board, we were surprised by the state and municipal decrees regulating the services and religious activities. The churches were to remain closed and services were to be online only.

At first, we were filled with several concerns and questions, especially about how to proceed from now on. As we had already been talking about the possibility of improving our online transmissions and investing in equipment, God placed in the hearts of two of our pastors the desire to help in this ministry. In the same week, we were able to hold the first meeting of leaders online to discuss the issue. This led to the creation of the Online Worship sector within the Ministry of Communication.

Eugenio Lima (Pastor of the Deaf) brought his own equipment (computer, cameras, screens, etc.) to the church sanctuary, and we made an improvised studio. He and Pastor Pedro Francisco Varga (Youth and Small Groups Pastor) took responsibility for all the transmissions and recordings that were necessary. They oriented the leadership and made themselves available so that the services, meetings, and live programs could be transmitted via YouTube.

In the beginning, we created two live programs during the week (one on Tuesday afternoon and another on Thursday afternoon), aiming to keep the church informed about the pandemic as well as united and participative – taking advantage of the fact that most members stayed home during the lockdown. Interviews were conducted with people from the healthcare industry, business people, self-employed people, professionals, and pastors, etc.

We received a camera as a gift and acquired a new computer to transmit the worship service. However, as it was not an adequate camera for transmission, we decided to invest in equipment and asked for technical orientation from the First Baptist Church of Curitiba's team. We bought a video production switcher and a new camera and tripod as well as lighting.

We are still learning and training new members for the sound system, multimedia, and worship broadcast teams.

The Church

In the worship area, our Minister of Music Marilia Pevidor de Carvalho Cavallari sought to review the structure of the services. This review was done in order to adapt the services to an online worship format while reducing, at first, the

worship team to avoid crowding. The church's choirs and ensembles started to rehearse online and to make individual recordings that, after being mixed, could be presented as videos during the services. Using some free tools on the internet (Zoom and Google Meet), we were able to start children's services online, thus enabling interaction with the children.

Robson Mattos, Children's Pastor, motivated his team and together they started to hold the children's service online, promoting games with the pre-teens and visiting the children (without entering their homes).

The Youth Ministry, the Deaf Ministry, and the Senior Adults Ministry tried to keep the fellowship and the programs using the same tools; however, some were not able to join as not everyone had internet access or the needed devices.

The Senior Adults Ministry is led by sister Vânia Kleinhans. She managed not only to motivate the elderly to make use of the internet, but she also sought the help of family members (children and grandchildren) of the senior adults in order to assist them.

The church fellowship was made more dynamic through the use of WhatsApp. In the group called "PIB Diversos," we provided a space for free, lively, and dynamic communication as well as using it for games, announcements, announcing birthdays, etc. In the "PIB intercession" WhatsApp group, only prayer requests and thanksgiving are allowed, and at the end of each day the pastor prays for the published requests.

The Sunday School had its activities interrupted in the first months. However, we decided to use Tuesday afternoons, replacing one of the weekly programs, to offer Online Bible School.

At the beginning of the second semester of 2020 with the return of our in-person services (with limited number according to the norms of the Health Department), it gave us the possibility to have a Sunday Bible school class and broadcast it to those who are staying at home.

The return of the in-person services, with only a third of the sanctuary's capacity, was received with some caution by most members of the church. Even now, more than eight months later, we still have not surpassed 100 people attending the service.

As it was mentioned in the beginning, the church was recovering from a financial crisis, and we thought it would get worse during lockdown due to a reduction of tithes and more. However, once again, God and the church

surprised us. In almost every month, we not only reached the budget but exceeded it. A large part of the church membership started to deposit or transfer their tithes. Today the minority of them deposit their tithes in the offering plate, but the offering moment in the service is often to hand over the proof of deposits.

The Church's Mission

The church had been working toward the implementation of Multiplier Small Groups for a few years. We were running five groups in 2019, looking to multiply the groups in 2020. This was the hardest hit ministry in the church. At first, we tried to keep the small groups in an online format without success. So, by the end of 2020, only one group was still meeting online.

Our church campuses continued their work. They have their own church sanctuaries and pastors. The Bairro Nova Primavera Campus was to be organized in August 2020 with 60 members. Unfortunately, we had to postpone the organization, and we hope it will be possible to organize it this year. The congregation in Bairro Guaraguaçu was the one that suffered the most. In addition to having few members, most of them are in their senior years. The congregation at Bairro Labra has had a good attendance and has not stopped its activities. This success is thanks to the hard work of its pastor who has been doing visits and meetings with small groups of young people to keep the flame alive.

Last year our main campus baptized only eight people. We have scheduled baptisms for this month.

As we said, we were surprised by the pandemic and the prohibition of resuming the services in person during the Brazilian International Mission Board's World Missions Campaign we have at church. At first, we thought that the campaign would be a failure. But God surprised us. Even with the church temple closed, we managed after four years of not reaching the offerings goal to not only reach the goal but also to surpass it. This is also what happened with the other campaigns we had.

It is worth sharing that the creativity of our Missions Council Leader was a very important piece for us to reach the offerings goal. Sister Elaini Lopes involved the whole church in a creative way. She managed to have free canteens and bazaars. It was a great success.

Society

At first, it was very difficult for our Ministry of Social Assistance to give support since its leader and a good number of its members are seniors or have some underlying condition. Even so, we tried to help especially those members who were experiencing some difficulty or who were unemployed. Throughout the year, we tried to adapt our services to the needs and the norms imposed by the government, particularly in the distribution of food.

We also tried to contribute through various media (newspaper, Facebook, and WhatsApp), helping make the population and the church members aware of the seriousness of the situation and many times calming the spirits of the nonconformists. We began to write, almost daily, articles on various issues that were linked to the pandemic and sought to reinforce the measures adopted by the government authorities, guiding the population and believers in general to do their part.

Objectively...

- We tried to be cautious from the beginning by faithfully obeying the decrees issued by the government. We put a banner in front of the church warning the population that, in cooperation with the government, our doors were closed.
- After putting prayer first, bringing awareness was and has been the most useful tool throughout the pandemic.
- We tried not to innovate in ecclesiastic practices (suppers, administrative assemblies, changes in the system of receiving members, etc.), meaning we did not change anything that could contradict our ecclesiology or theology. We know that the pandemic will pass, but the principles will not.
- We started to hold online meetings, almost weekly, with the church leadership and gradually spaced out the meetings.
- We froze the budget and the release of funds is no longer automatic, requiring authorization from the Finance Division depending on the amount.
- We took advantage of what we already had in place regarding online services. However, initially with the borrowing of equipment (computer, video camera, and lights), we started broadcasting until we could get more training and buy our own equipment. We avoided going into debt, and caution and information were key points.
- The decisions, at first, became more centralized in the Leaders' Council (pastors, ministry and division leaders, deacons, and church board). In

the second half of 2020, we started back in-person services and resumed the church assemblies after the services.

- The scheduled conferences and retreats were transformed into live programs on YouTube, and the preachers previously invited remained the same.
- We maintained the campaigns to raise offerings for Missions (State, National and World), and we exceeded the offering goals in all of them.
- The Church's Board of Directors and the other elected positions for the year 2020 had their mandates extended until the end of 2021.
- During the pandemic, we could see how good and faithful God is. He provides for all our needs.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. The article shares about an increase in giving in spite of economic challenges stemming from COVID-19. Have you felt a call toward greater generosity during this season and how have you responded?
2. The church featured in the article found WhatsApp to be a helpful tool to connect with their community. What technology has been most helpful to your community? Are there other tools you are researching to implement long-term?
3. The church sought to remain true to their theology and ecclesiology. How have you been able to hold fast in these areas?



About the Author

Nivaldo Aparecido Cavallari was born in October 1958 in São Manoel, São Paulo, Brazil. He received his Bachelor's Degree in Theology from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary of Brazil in 1983, his Pedagogy Degree from the State University of Paraná in 2012, and his Post-Graduate Degree in Theology from the Theological College of Paraná in 2003. He has served as the pastor of First Baptist Church of Paranaguá since 1995. He is married to Marília Pevidor de Carvalho Cavallari.



Church Budget Planning in a Pandemic

Matt Cook | USA

I know every church doesn't follow the same rhythms, but in the last two churches I pastored, Labor Day to Christmas was my most hectic time of year. In addition to the normal busyness of congregational life, we created our annual plan for the next year. And at the top of the list of significant planning was the process of creating the next year's budget.

Most of the time, we look backwards before we look forward. We make our decisions about our financial future based on the recent past. Of course, that suggests a certain amount of stability and predictability, but what are we supposed to do when the recent past has been anything but stable and predictable? Can anyone tell me what unemployment is going to look like six months from now? Does anyone know when we're going to have global access to a vaccine? Yeah, me neither.

So how are we supposed to plan during all this uncertainty? Here are three suggestions you might consider as you start your process.

1. Make a plan but build in flexibility.

A few years ago, I was pastoring a church and we were in the middle of a major stewardship campaign that was going to have an enormous impact not only on the budget but also on the strategic direction of our congregation. We had decided, however, that we were going to base any plans we made on actual pledges that year. That made budget planning a real challenge. So, believe it or not, we made out three different budgets. We called them our Chevrolet budget, our Buick budget, and our Cadillac budget. The basic idea was that we had some definite costs that were in all three budgets but variations on the theme that made up the rest.

Taking that kind of step involves a lot more work for the staff and lay leader(s) that oversee the process, but it also enables you to be intentional with your spending no matter what happens. Every church budget has some costs in it that are basically set. You're going to pay your electric bills, your insurance costs, and you're almost certainly going to pay your personnel what's in the budget. So, when a downturn hits, churches tend to cut back on mission and ministry. There are ways, however, to structure your budget to make certain you pay for what's most important in your mission and ministry budget – not just what happens first in the year. If you start with a lean budget but with the flexibility to scale up as the year progresses, then as long as you've got what's most important in that lean budget (even if it's later in the year), you'll have the funds to carry it out.

2. Over-communicate what you're doing and why.

Part of the reason we took the step of creating several different budgets that year was for planning purposes, but another reason was more about what that kind of effort communicated to the congregation. Doing that kind of work earned our leadership a significant amount of trust from the congregation. We didn't just make a plan – we told them what the plans were and why we were making them.

Information relieves anxiety and builds trust, and I probably don't have to tell you this, but these are anxious times on a variety of levels. On the other hand, if the members of your church know that you're taking the challenges into account and making a plan not just to keep the lights on but to engage in meaningful mission and ministry even during this pandemic, they're going to do everything they can to support that. You may feel like what you're saying about any financial plans that you're making is incredibly obvious, but not only should you be stating the obvious, you should probably be repeating it over

and over. People always gravitate toward calm certainty in the midst of crisis, and so one of your most important jobs in the coming months will be to calmly remind your people that the work of God is still ongoing and that they can help make it happen with their stewardship.

And speaking of stating the obvious, I probably don't have to tell you that it's also a good idea to name (acknowledge) that some of the people in your church are being pinched by the financial aspect of this crisis and that you expect that to have an impact on their ability to give. In its own way, naming that out loud and reminding them that part of the financial ministry of the Church is to care for its own will also stir the ones who can give to do so. Words matter – even more so in a crisis. Use yours to build trust and set direction.

3. Emphasize impact.

Providing information is one of the two most important things you can do to build and maintain a positive spirit in your congregation in the midst of this crisis, but there's a second thing that's just as important – giving people a way to make a difference.

Part of what makes this pandemic so challenging for so many of us is that it feels so out of control. There's nothing you and I can do to make a vaccine get here faster. And yet, while that's true medically, we can certainly provide a way for the people of God to make a real impact on those who are hit the hardest by this pandemic. Over the past few months, I've been paying close attention to the congregations who seemed to have side-stepped the worst financial aspects of this pandemic. The ones that are doing the strongest financially almost all seem to have something in common – they gave the people in their congregations a way to make a substantive impact on the people who were hurting. One staff team in Richmond, Virginia, asked the Finance Committee of their church to take all the staff development money in the budget for this year and next year and shift it to local missions. The word got out in the congregation, and checks started coming in to match the amount. In a few weeks, the church quadrupled its local missions line item and started advertising that they had a fund to help the unemployed and the underemployed. A church in Florida set a goal to help a local non-profit focused on hunger relief. A member of the church gave a matching gift and once again the word spread. When it was all said and done, the church doubled the amount of its highest donation ever.

It would be easy to look at next year's budget and simply hold the line or make a small cut, but a budget isn't just a bunch of numbers. It's a statement about values and about your faith. You may very well need to cut next year's

budget for your church, and you shouldn't feel like a failure if that's the right decision. But next year's budget should still make a statement about what's important. My advice is to make a plan that gives your people a way to make an impact on the people hit the hardest by this crisis. If you make that kind of plan and you spend some time and energy telling them why that's the plan, you might be surprised at the result.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What has been the most challenging aspect of budget planning over the last year?
2. How can you incorporate the concept of a flexible budget into your planning?
3. What steps can you take to communicate effectively with your church/community about budget needs and plans as you prepare for the coming year?
4. How can you celebrate the impact of what God has done and is doing through the faithful generosity of your community?

About the Author



Dr. Matt Cook is the full-time Assistant Director of the Center for Healthy Churches and has served local congregations for more than twenty-five years, nearly twenty as a senior pastor in churches in Texas, Arkansas, and North Carolina. He is an undergraduate of Samford University, obtaining his M.Div and Ph.D. (Church History) at Baylor University. He is highly involved in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship at both state and national levels, having served on the Coordinating Councils of both Texas and Arkansas, as well as the Moderator of CBF National. He was also the founding conveyor of Current, CBF's Young Leaders Network. He can be reached at mattc@chchurches.org.



Creating Meaningful Engagement and Connection in Online Worship

Angela D. French | Hong Kong

In early 2020, our church – Kowloon International Baptist Church (Hong Kong) – began to experience the shocks of an epidemic that was quickly spreading throughout Asia. By late February, we had to close our doors to comply with local social distancing⁵⁷ regulations.

Like many other churches, we were unprepared for virtual worship services, so we cobbled together a self-guided worship order each week and attempted to ramp up communication through social media. When we realized that COVID-19 was becoming a global issue that would not quickly recede, we invested in equipment and training so our church family could worship

⁵⁷ i.e. Physical distancing. We recognize that the terms “social distancing” and “physical distancing” are interchangeable, but that depending on the country, people group and language, one term may be used over another in the local context.

together using live stream technology. Over the ensuing months, we learned much about the importance of connecting with one another and how to instill a sense of community among our people, even in the midst of physical separation.

Firstly, we saw the necessity of adopting language that represented our goal in online worship: engagement. We made an effort to avoid terminology such as “watching the service” or “viewing the videos.” Instead, we invited people to “join together online” and “participate” in times of singing, reading Scripture, praying, and studying God’s Word. We emphasized that “we are the church,” and that the church is not merely a building or physical location.

Secondly, to help people have a more concrete understanding of how to fully participate in an online gathering, we assembled a “Worship at Home” guide. [Resource link included below.] Practical suggestions included establishing a particular space and time for worship in the home, removing potential distractions, putting mobile devices on silent, and preparing materials beforehand (a Bible, a note-taking device, online giving of tithes and offerings, and Lord’s Supper elements). We reiterated that singing helps us internalize the message and acknowledged that the sound of the voice was less important than the condition of the heart.

For families with young children, our worship guide offered suggestions for kids, such as using blocks or toys to build something they learned about in a Bible story or providing coloring pages and pictures with Scripture verses or blank paper for drawing. During times of singing, kids can play an instrument, dance, clap, or move around the room. As hands-on learners, children need the opportunity to express their understanding of God in age-specific ways. Online worship at home is, in fact, a unique opportunity to teach children what it means to join with a community of believers in praising God and studying the Bible. Little ones who would ordinarily be “too wiggly” to sit through an in-the-building service can especially benefit from this time of family-friendly worship in the home.

Our worship guide encouraged families with older children or youth to interact with one another through conversation and discussion. A live stream worship service can be paused to address questions, or parents can create a time of dialogue during a meal or outing later in the day. The shared time of online worship lends itself to finding common ground with family members of different ages.

For those in our church family who live alone or who live in households without other Christians, our worship guide listed such suggestions as gathering in pairs or small groups to participate in the service together (when

appropriate and safe). Connections through online social platforms also give opportunity for individuals to join in a worship service with other believers in real-time, even while physically separated.

Thirdly, while trying to facilitate meaningful live stream worship services, we recognized a deep sense of disconnection among our people. One way we addressed this feeling of isolation was to include familiar faces in our online worship times. We invited people to send us photos of their at-home worship, and – with their permission – we incorporated these pictures into weekly online services. Our virtual community felt enriched when we could see one another engaging in these same live stream worship experiences: a middle-aged couple sitting on a sofa, a young family with kids spread around the den, a dancing child, a mother holding the family dog, a group of friends sitting outside on a park bench, young adults connected on a Zoom call while joining the online service.

We also made a deliberate effort to incorporate various members of our church community into the live stream worship services. The local social distancing regulations often allowed only a few people to be present in our building on a Sunday morning, so we pre-recorded individuals reading Scripture, praying, or sharing a testimony. Stories from church members who faced similar struggles or who experienced God’s help in a specific way brought inspiration and reassurance.

Children, in particular, were eager to participate. During a sermon series focused on hope, we asked kids to record themselves reciting a Bible verse about the hope we have in Christ. At Christmas, we invited kids to share their favorite part of the story of the birth of Jesus. As a church family, we loved seeing the faces of children taking part in worship, and we marveled at how much they had grown since we last saw them in person. These video clips, when added to our live stream worship times, gave new energy and encouragement to our church community.

Lastly, in addition to providing at-home worship services on Sundays, we established a twice-monthly online worship experience called “Refresh.” Every other Friday evening, volunteers from our worship leadership team produced a 10-15-minute time featuring prayer, Scripture reading, and worship music.

The flexibility of this schedule and format allowed us to focus on different themes in various ways. Sometimes we included pre-recorded interviews with members of our church as we addressed faith-related topics. On other occasions, we introduced new songs, looked deeper into the meaning of favorite worship songs, explored ways of enriching our family worship times, or experienced moments of laughter. In December, we held a special live

Christmas carol sing-along online, which gave our people a chance to sing Christmas songs that were especially meaningful to our community. Throughout 2020, our ongoing Friday evening online gatherings gave us another opportunity to engage with one another and worship together during the week.

As our church family continues to walk through COVID-related struggles and social distancing requirements, we keep seeking more ways to connect, to engage in meaningful worship times together as the body of Christ, and to encourage each other as followers of Jesus.

Sample “Worship at Home” Guide

Download available at: <https://www.baptistworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/KIBC-Worship-at-Home.pdf>

Prayer

Dear God, in times of uncertainty and chaos -- both within and around us -- teach us to build and strengthen connections with one another. Show us how to create times and places for interaction with others from our church communities. Help us see opportunities instead of roadblocks as we face extraordinary challenges related to COVID-19. May we find our hope in you, and may we encourage one another -- and all the more as we see the Day approaching. Amen.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What are some ways we can increase a sense of community in corporate worship online, despite physical separation?
2. How can our personal stories of God’s provision be utilized to bring hope to others in our community?
3. What practical ideas would help us—and individuals and families in our church—fully engage in a live stream worship service?
4. How can we encourage families to teach and model for their children what it means to participate in corporate worship?



About the Author

Angela D. French is the Minister of Music of Kowloon International Baptist Church in Hong Kong.



Creativity in Lockdown

Paul Campion | United Kingdom

Along with many other churches across the world, we found ourselves very suddenly thrust into a new way of thinking and working in March 2020. We have progressed through these months with the inevitable highs and lows of church life. In this article, I would like to focus on some of our more creative initiatives that have been a real blessing, and in so doing want to emphasize that this is very much the work of others in the congregation rather than me. Ultimately, we give glory to God for the blessings which have been known.

After an introduction to set the scene, I will describe a few specific projects, offer a brief theological reflection, include some questions for discussion and a prayer. A short video available at [BaptistWorld.org/mission-guide](https://www.baptistworld.org/mission-guide) will help to illustrate two of the projects described.

INTRODUCTION

Shirley Baptist Church is a congregation of around 200 members, 100 adults who would consider this to be their church and 100 children and young

people who are connected with us in various ways. Our ministry team includes myself, Martin and Jacquie Knott (working with Children, Families, and Youth) and Amanda Crocker (Pastoral Worker). Martin and I are full-time, and Jacquie and Amanda are part-time. We also have two people working a job-share for the church office, and a team of three (manager and two assistant managers) working in our coffee shop. We are located in the borough of Solihull on the edge of Birmingham in the United Kingdom (UK).

CHILDREN AND YOUTH

From the very beginning, we decided that there were very different needs and opportunities among the varied age groups of our church community, and so Martin and Jacquie focussed on providing a weekly online presentation for the children called SBCKids. You can access our [YouTube Channel](#) or view a sample of a recent drama on the [BWA site](#). The children love the drama, the activities, the singing and all the elements of this program. It has served to strengthen faith and encourage families throughout the pandemic. In addition, from time to time, activity boxes have been delivered to the homes of each family with crafts for Easter, ideas for a light party at home, and other seasonal and special events.

The young people meet together on a different media platform where the program is more interactive and works at two levels – a lighter activity-focused program and a deeper discussion-based program. This has also been a vital element of sustaining community and developing faith in such a difficult time when many regular activities have been curtailed.

CREATIVE WORSHIP

The transition to online worship has been a challenge across the globe, and especially the preparation of home-grown music. We have found that our congregation appreciates seeing and hearing those they know leading the worship songs, and therefore we have tried to use our musicians in preparing worship material in various forms. In addition to using well-known songs already published, two of our congregation members wrote a wonderful song entitled “Outrageously Blessed,” with the first part of the song featured in the video compilation on the [BWA site](#). The full song is available to view on our [YouTube Channel](#). This song presents a positive note and has been a great blessing to help the congregation look beyond their individual challenges to the bigger picture, always remembering there are genuine reasons to be thankful.

On the technology side, we look back to our first efforts of recorded services, and whilst they were a great achievement at the time, we have been blessed

with those who have steered the church forward to what is now a very effective livestream. We have the capacity to present everything live or a mix of live and recorded material, incorporating responses from the scattered congregation with the use of live chat. Those who are not able to link up with this technology are offered a CD or DVD that is delivered to them as soon as possible after the services.

CROSS-CULTURAL MISSION

One of our families felt very early in lockdown that they needed to bring together those they knew in the UK and across the world who spoke their mother tongue from India and establish an online prayer and Bible study group. This group expanded very quickly and met every evening for one hour of prayer and Bible teaching. Soon a parallel activity for children and young people began to take shape, and now there is a very strong and well-established online community with its own regular pattern of activities. This group has been an immense blessing and encouragement to so many people, and portions of the story have been shared through the websites of several denominations. [Click to learn more](#) about the project.

PASTORAL CARE

Our appointment of Amanda as our Pastoral Worker happened during the lockdown. It was clear that many of our congregation were finding life especially challenging with the pain of losing family members, the loss of jobs, and the pressures of home schooling. For others, it was loneliness and struggles with their mental health. Early in lockdown, we established a network of support through homegroups and in other ways, but it was clear that we needed to coordinate this in a more strategic manner and help to bring greater depth to the care which was being offered, both within and beyond the congregation. The appointment of a pastoral worker has been a wonderful provision of God in response to this need.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Many questions have arisen around the theology of worship, fellowship, and of church in a time of lockdown, but I will focus especially here on worship. Along with so many other congregations, we have offered a weekly service online, with creative elements, using our own congregation, sometimes recorded and sometimes livestream, and have responded to prayer requests in the chat and interacted with the dispersed congregation in every possible way. Nevertheless, we constantly hear the comment, “It is not the same.”

What is diminished and what remains undiminished? Surely God himself is not limited because the act of worship takes place on Zoom or through a livestream on YouTube? In some ways, I sense that the Spirit of God has worked more powerfully in lockdown services as people have listened to the Word of God, but in another way it does feel like a dimension is missing. The gathering together of one body of people in one place, together offering praise to God and together hearing and responding to the Word of God is undoubtedly lacking. A sensitive worship band will respond to the way that the congregation is singing and lead them to a deeper awareness of the presence of God, and an experienced preacher will speak in a way which interacts with the congregation even when the dialogue is unspoken. These elements are lacking when the music is pre-recorded and the preacher delivers a message to a tiny lens in a camera, imagining as they do the hundreds of devices receiving the signal in their homes.

Our attempts at creativity and inclusion within our worship events have shown that the Spirit of God is not hindered by the circumstances we face, and people have been wonderfully blessed and encouraged. But the experience is not the same as a physical congregation gathered together and led with spiritual sensitivity and insight. This inevitably leads to a number of key questions:

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What are the similarities and differences between 'physical' and 'digital' worship?
2. How can we best facilitate a true encounter with God in worship when using a digital platform?
3. How can in-depth pastoral care be offered when social distancing and mask wearing are essential for any person-to-person conversation?
4. When history is written, how will the Christian community reflect on the spiritual impact of this time?

Prayer

Father God, thank you so much that you are the Alpha and Omega, the one who sees the beginning and the ending of all time. Help us to see this present season of life within the bigger picture of the world you have created and come to redeem. We acknowledge that it has been a time of hugely mixed emotions and experiences across the world, and that the Christian church has journeyed through a time of rapid and enforced change. Nevertheless, we thank you for the immense blessings of this time, the creativity which has emerged, the signs of your Spirit at work, and the people who have come to

faith. May we continue to learn and grow in our walk with You, and find that our worship, our mission, our community action, and our pastoral care are all enriched because of the experiences we have known. We bring our prayers to you in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.



About the Author

Following a clear sense of the call of God to ministry in 1974, Paul Campion has served in four Baptist churches in the United Kingdom, representing more than four decades of ministry service. He is married to Frances, and they have three adult children and two grandchildren.



Freedom of Religion or Belief and COVID-19: What Makes for a Legitimate Limitation?

Kieryn Wurts | United Kingdom

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a number of acute global challenges. One challenge that faith communities have faced is restrictions on physical gatherings. Countless Sunday services, prayer meetings, weddings, baptisms, funerals, youth retreats, conferences, and many other aspects of church life have been restricted over the past year in order to protect against the spread of COVID-19. Even as many faith communities have sought creative solutions in community care, poverty, and disaster relief as well as through alternative online fellowship, the possibility for faith communities to physically gather for worship and fellowship has been dearly missed by many.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a series of overwhelming social and political challenges, including questions of equity of access to healthcare as well as intensifying issues of global poverty and inequality. It has also led to

restrictions to freedom of movement. As a response to these challenges, many have raised the question: “Have the social distancing restrictions gone too far?” Many have questioned whether COVID-19 restrictions constitute a violation of fundamental rights or the right to freedom of religion or belief (FORB).

Global Baptists have been monitoring this issue since the early days of the pandemic, engaging with civil society, other faith groups, and local and national governments to try to find satisfying answers to this question. In the vast majority of cases, restrictions on religious gatherings to protect vulnerable persons in view of a public health crisis represents a legitimate restriction from a human rights perspective. Here we’ll explore the human rights framework for freedom of religion or belief and some of the implications for our faith communities in this extraordinary time.

FORB FUNDAMENTALS AND POSSIBLE LEGITIMATE LIMITATIONS

Article 18 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) states that:

“Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right includes freedom to change her/his religion or belief and the freedom, with others and in public or private, to manifest her/his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.”

Article 18 is enshrined in international treaty law through the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).⁵⁸ Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, communities of faith all across the globe have experienced some level of restrictions on gathering, worshiping together, and serving their communities. How is this possible when the right to manifest a religion or belief, in private or public, alone or with others, is enshrined in international human rights law?

The answer to this question lies in provisions within the human rights framework for the legitimate limitations of some aspects of the right to freedom of religion or belief under exceptional circumstances. Article 18 is divided between absolute or non-derogable rights which cannot be restricted under any circumstances, and other rights that may, under the most limited of circumstances, temporarily be restricted. Put simply, the right to confess or identify with your faith (for example: to confess your faith in Jesus Christ or to be a Christian) cannot be restricted under any circumstances; such a right is non-derogable. The right to manifest religious belief (for example: the right to express your faith in public, corporate worship) can however be restricted under a very limited set of circumstances. Any potential restriction to the manifestation of religious belief must fulfill all of the following four criteria. A proposed restriction must:

⁵⁸ To see if your country has signed and ratified the ICCPR, visit https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?chapter=4&clang=_en&mtdsg_no=IV-4&src=IND

1. Be provided for in existing law.
2. Be necessary to protect:
 - a. Public safety
 - b. Public order or morals
 - c. Rights and freedoms of others
3. Be non-discriminatory.
4. Be proportionate to the situation.

A restriction on religious gathering is then permissible if the country has legally codified a provision to restrict public gatherings in emergency situations that constitute a major threat to public health or public safety, i.e. a pandemic. Further, any such restrictions must be non-discriminatory, that is the restrictions must apply equally to all religious groups. Any restrictions on the gathering that are applied in a discriminatory way (i.e. one religious group receives exemptions from restrictions as a show of favoritism over other groups) are in violation of international human rights standards.

Finally, any restrictions on religious gatherings must be continually reassessed and adapted in proportion to the threat. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, if the threat level lowers, then restrictions should be loosened. Further, if the threat is nearly entirely removed, then the restrictions on gathering should also be removed. To reiterate, any restriction on religious expressions in response to the pandemic must fulfill all four criteria. Failure to fulfill even one of the above criteria would render restrictions illegitimate by international human rights standards.

LOOKING BACK: *Examples and Approaches from the European Context*

The first wave of lockdowns to protect against the COVID-19 threat hit Europe in March 2020. Schools, offices, non-essential shops, indoor gatherings, public life, and religious services all but came to a halt in the hopes of limiting the spread of the virus and preventing hospitals and medical care providers from being overwhelmed. Restrictions were gradually loosened in Europe during the late spring and early summer as the infection rates waned. In Germany, for example, religious services were forbidden in the first lockdown in the spring but allowed during the summer under specific hygiene regulations. An April decision from the German Constitutional Court indicated that blanket prohibitions on religious services, even in response to a public health crisis, are not compatible with fundamental rights guaranteed by the German constitution.⁵⁹ Measures made to protect public health should not constitute an all-out ban on religious gatherings in Germany. In reflection of this decision and in contrast to the previous lockdown, religious gatherings are still allowed in Germany during the second “lockdown,” which began in November 2020, was made stricter before Christmas, and remained in effect until the spring of 2021.

⁵⁹ For more information, see: <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/gottesdienste-verfassungsgericht-corona-101.html>

In the spring of 2020, the Conference of European Churches (CEC) Working Group on Human Rights produced a position paper, addressing issues of freedom of religion or belief during the COVID-19 crisis. The group assessed the restrictions on religious gatherings as in-line with international human rights standards and encouraged religious communities to cooperate with public health authorities while also defending the rights of individuals and communities to question protocols through the appropriate channels, should they suspect they doubt the legality of any of the measures. CEC indicated that “to do so, is not a sign of a lack of solidarity, but of the exercise of another fundamental right – that of legal protection.” Indeed, even with all of the difficulties, there have been countless stories of faith communities demonstrating solidarity throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, both in their cooperation with protocols intended to protect public health as well as their willingness to support the sick, marginalized, and vulnerable persons impacted by the pandemic. Baptists have been among the voices calling for justice in global vaccine distribution as well as in providing crisis relief for those affected by earthquakes in Croatia, the explosions in Beirut, and refugees and asylum-seekers living in vulnerable circumstances in Turkey and the Balkans. The danger in all of these crises has only been intensified by the ongoing pandemic conditions.

LOOKING FORWARD IN HOPE

The COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the greatest challenges of our lifetimes. We have lost many to this illness. Many more have suffered emotionally, spiritually, financially, and socially as a result of the isolation caused by the largely necessary social distancing protocols. The civil and political rights that we hold so dear, and that some were previously lucky enough to take for granted, were suddenly temporarily restricted in order to prevent a deadly, exponential spread of the virus. Many asked if their rights, including their right to religious freedom, were being violated while also worrying about the rights of their brothers and sisters in faith across the globe. It seems, however, that the COVID-19 pandemic was not used as a pretext to restrict freedom of religion or belief in all but the rarest of cases. The majority of restrictions on public gatherings seem to have fallen under the purview of legitimate limitations to collective worship in view of a grave public health threat.

Still, we have seen Baptists pose reasonable questions to their governments about the justice and proportionality of certain COVID-19 measures; such questioning should not only be seen as permissible but vital to the health of a democratic society. Further, we have seen Baptists make bold and Christ-like efforts to support the most vulnerable during the pandemic.

With mass vaccination efforts already underway, there is hope on the horizon for an end to the pandemic. With this, we can rightly hope for a day where we can again gather again in worship and physical community. But there is still danger on the horizon. The Baptist World Alliance has called broadly for a just global distribution of the vaccine. Fair distribution of the vaccine in all countries and regions and across all income levels is not only vital from a justice standpoint, but also vital to effectively combat COVID-19 and prevent dangerous mutations. As Baptists and people of faith, it is important that we continue to follow recommended health protocols, encourage our communities to seek vaccination, and continue to monitor the situation regarding freedom of religion or belief. We pray for the good health of our neighbors, we mourn for those whom we have lost, we stand up for dignity and equality for all in the vaccination process, and we pray for a day when we can soon gather again in praise of the God of all hope who walks with us even in the valley of the shadow of death.

Further Resources

Conference of European Churches (CEC). 2020. CEC Thematic Group on Human Rights reflections on Freedom of Religion or Belief during the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. 2020. <https://www.ceceurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Covid-19-and-FORB-FINAL-20-04-2020-.pdf>

World Health Organization (WHO). 7 April 2020. Practical considerations and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in the context of COVID-19. guidelines for religious organizations. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/practical-considerations-and-recommendations-for-religious-leaders-and-faith-based-communities-in-the-context-of-covid-19>

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. March 2020. The Global Response to the Coronavirus: Impact on Religious Practice and Religious Freedom. <https://www.uscirf.gov/resources/factsheet-global-response-coronavirus-covid-19-and-impact-religious-practice-and>

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Do you think geographic areas with the most expansive personal freedoms have been the most challenged by restrictions on the freedom of assembly? Why or why not?
2. One of the biggest arguments against restrictions on religious gatherings has been that it is not non-discriminatory, and therefore does not meet all four criteria. Even when certain restrictions apply to all

religious gatherings, restrictions often differ for non-religious gatherings, i.e., for stores and the retail industry, bars/restaurants and the hospitality industry, or protests and political rallies. What discrepancies have you seen in your community and how has it made supporting restrictions more of a challenge?

3. In what ways has your church worked to ensure equity of healthcare for underserved populations in your community?



About the Author

Kiernyn Wurts serves as a Researcher in Freedom of Religion or Belief (FORB) and Human Rights at the European Baptist Federation.



Leading the Church Beyond the Pandemic

Jerson B. Narciso | The Philippines

My primary purpose in this article is to discuss how the Church can respond to needs and engage meaningfully in the midst of this life-threatening pandemic that has swept the whole world. More precisely, my intention is to understand how the Church as the body of Christ should respond to crisis situations and lead communities to resilience. My response to this question is born out of our actual experience and encounter with the COVID-19 pandemic. In this way, I hope my presentation will be more practical and realistic than theoretical.

As you may know, the Philippines has been the worst hit by the coronavirus in Southeast Asia. While other Asian countries are slowly recovering from this global pandemic, the Philippines is still reeling from its devastating effects (in late 2020). The number of people getting infected by COVID-19 is still escalating, and the situation seems to be out of control. Budgets are getting depleted and the Philippine government is running out of funds to fight

against the spread of the virus. Prolonged lockdowns, community quarantines, and travel restrictions have paralyzed the Philippine economy and resulted in closure of businesses and loss of jobs and earnings.

The domino effects of this all-time low economic condition in our country are felt everywhere, and our churches are no exception. The devastating economic impact of the pandemic has greatly hampered our operations and ministries. Our churches and member institutions are forced to make contingency plans and implement cost-cutting measures to lessen the impact of these economic woes, and in the process many of our plans and commitments have been compromised.

Indeed, life in this most troubled and trying time is characterized by brokenness. People are feeling the pain of isolation, of losing their jobs, and for some the loss of their loved ones. The massive and terrible impact of the pandemic has led us to a heightened awareness of our human vulnerability and brokenness. It has made us more conscious of the undeniable reality that finitude, dependency, and vulnerability are part of our being human and there are situations in life that are way beyond our human control.

Given the precarious state and condition of our country and the world, what must we do as a church called by God to become light and salt of the earth? How can we meaningfully address emerging issues and concerns such as the “new normal” that confront our churches today? Let me suggest a few things that we as a church can do in this time of pandemic and beyond:

First and foremost, as a church, we must accept and embrace the reality of our own brokenness and vulnerability. In a culture that is characterized by the dream of control and predictability, vulnerability must be avoided. Prevailing cultural values tell us that the ideal human being is independent, self-sufficient, and invulnerable. Security in that sense is defined as the opposite of vulnerability. This perceived invulnerability seems to influence the way we Christians think and do things in the church. We tend to avoid negative thoughts and emotions associated to vulnerability because they are a threat to our security and human existence. We even use religious language to suppress or deny them. As much as possible, we want to paint the church as perfect and invulnerable. This ethic of invulnerability, however, runs the risk of detaching itself from human reality. It runs counter to our faith conviction that is grounded in both our biblical heritage and in our daily experiences of vulnerability. In fact, “we understand spirituality in the context of our humanity”⁶⁰ and unless we are able to connect to our humanness, we cannot

⁶⁰ Herman A. Moldez, Senior Pastor, Faith Baptist Church, Quezon City and General Secretary of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. Reflection on Psalm 34:17-20, “Close to the Brokenhearted” during the CPBC Hour Online Worship, October 3, 2020.

sympathize and identify ourselves with the vulnerable other – those who are weak, poor, and suffering.

The Gospels depict the vulnerability of Jesus as pivotal to the fulfillment of his redemptive mission in the world. From his birth to his crucifixion, Jesus is portrayed as vulnerable, and this vulnerability is understood not as a weakness but as strength – not as defeat but as victory. Jesus’s victory was won not by virtue of using his heavenly power to dominate and control, but by virtue of his humble act of allowing himself to be human and to identify with the sufferings of those he came to save.

Looking at Jesus as our model, we are reminded that we are called to share in the sufferings of people around us, opening ourselves in this encounter to our own vulnerability and mortality.

This is what it means to walk with Christ and to live out our faith in God. An ethic of shared vulnerability enhances our sense of responsibility and accountability at all levels: in our personal dealings, in the family, in congregations, organizations, the local community, and the larger society as a whole. Vulnerability is not a lamentable reality, but the basic precondition of a responsible, meaningful, and productive life. It paves the way for the church to stand on street corners in solidarity with the poor, the oppressed, the weak, and the suffering.

My hope is that this shared sense of vulnerability can inform our ethical thinking and mission activities towards strengthening the spirit of interdependence, mutual accountability, and redeeming love for all humankind. Keeping close to the central message of the Gospel and not yielding to the pressures and temptations of the powers of this world, the Church should be a principle contributor in reaching this goal.

Second, the COVID-19 pandemic presents opportunities for us to rethink and reconsider our usual way of doing things as a church. The pandemic is creating new realities, new relationships, new concepts, and new ways of thinking and doing things. It is drastically changing our missional context, and we are challenged to think “outside of the box.” Whether we like it or not, “this world-wide phenomenon becomes a new condition or reality that exposes both the inadequacies and strengths of many of our churches, leadership, and ministries. The global Church, therefore, is obliged to reorient her ways of life and reframe her ministerial leadership style.”⁶¹ Changes, innovations,

⁶¹ Notes from Joshua Zonita, Professor, Systematic Theology at Central Philippine University, Jaro, Iloilo City, Philippines.

readjustments and restructuring of our methods and approaches to doing missions are necessary and welcome.

The critical 21st century challenge for the Church in this time of pandemic is how to deal with the formation of virtual Christianity wherein personal presence, considered essential to its life and ministry, is lacking and where interaction is realized through non-physical media platforms. Considering the gravity of the impact of the pandemic, one thing that our churches should develop is a clear and relevant vision and mission statement that incorporates disaster preparedness strategies. In this way, our churches will be more proactive in responding to calamities that may come at any time. This is vital for human existence and survival and, therefore, the church should give substantial attention to it.

Third, this global pandemic accentuates the call for unity and collaboration among and between different churches and organizations. To survive and go beyond this pandemic, we must affirm and acknowledge our interdependence and our need to unite and cooperate to achieve a common goal. As members of one body –the body of Christ – we are endowed with different gifts, and yet we are guided and inspired by the same Spirit to do God’s work. Building up the body of Christ requires cooperation rather than competition. Paul admonished this in Ephesians 4:1-3. This time of crisis should make us aware of the importance of living together in unity because our chances of survival as human beings and as a church will depend so much on our ability to unite and work together towards a common cause. There may be times when misunderstandings and disagreements occur among us. Like branches on a tree, our lives may grow in different directions, yet our roots remain as one. We are a people belonging to God, and in him we are one.

Lastly, we journey together, and as we do God’s mission in the world, we remember God is with us. God is active in our lives and is responsive to our needs and to our prayers. And so, we should not despair in the face of adversities but look to God to work for good even in the worst of circumstances. The Bible presents a loving and caring God who dwells with us, making his home among his people. In the Old Testament, the tabernacle is an especially powerful symbol of God’s presence among his pilgrim people on earth.

God’s people are sojourners in the land, thus they are uniquely placed to understand and identify themselves with the poor, the weak, and the oppressed. The Church, for that matter, is among mankind as God’s tent of meeting, sharing in mankind’s joys and hopes, anxieties and sufferings. It stands with every man and woman of every place and time, to bring them the good news of the kingdom of God. Yes, in spite of our brokenness, we can be

a blessing to the world. As a community and as members of God's household, we live with confidence in the promise that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus! We believe that no pandemic, no illness or disease, nothing done by us and nothing done to us, not even death itself, can break God's solidarity with us and with all creation (Romans 8:38-39).

For Discussion and Reflection

1. How do you accept and embrace the reality of your own brokenness and vulnerability?
2. What are some new ways for us to do things as a global Church and within your specific church community?
3. How can we show unity and collaboration with other Christians?
4. Where do you best see God with us in this pandemic?



About the Author

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Pandemic-Born Creativity

Allison Benfield | USA

Here in Charlotte, North Carolina, in the United States, St. John's Baptist has been living in the realm of virtual ministry for close to a year now. Our last Sunday physically together was March 8, 2020. Like all of you, our usual routines and ways of doing ministry have been disrupted, and we have had to adapt to the reality of the pandemic. I have come to realize this time has opened me up to God's creative Spirit through the disruption of normality. What follows is a story of the creative Spirit at work in me blended with some more practical information about how that creativity has manifested itself in my ministry.

As Advent and Christmas Eve approached, I felt the grief from our people and within myself that we would not get to celebrate the birth of Christ in the way we all wanted to –physically together. For me, Christmas Eve night is truly a holy one as love is always so tangible in our worship together. This particular service engages so many of the senses in a way that a typical worship service does not. There are things to see and hear, things to touch, and things to taste.

While we missed celebrating Easter together, it had come so early in our pandemic journey that we were still optimistic that we would be back together again by the summer, so the grief over a different way of celebrating Easter was not as heavy as the grief I sensed surrounding Christmas. The Spirit moved in that sense of loss to spark creativity in me. I searched for a way that we could offer some sense of normalcy and connectedness. I played with the idea of a progressive, outdoor Christmas Eve service that would take small groups through stations to experience and participate in the parts of worship that hold so much meaning for so many: music, story, Communion, and candles. Rising case numbers in our area and projections of troubling metrics in December led me to put that idea back on the shelf fairly quickly. I was back to brainstorming.

Early in the pandemic, I saw many children's ministers talking about the kits they put together for their children and families as a way to offer a tangible connection to their church family and to offer a way to continue to engage in spiritual growth. I put together kits of my own for our children and families for the summer and fall of 2020. As we got closer and closer to Advent, there was a lot of talk about what items to include in Advent kits for children, but I kept sensing that I needed to do more than something only for children. Then the Spirit sent an idea bubbling up within me – we could create Christmas Eve kits to offer a tiny bit of normalcy to what we all knew would be a far from normal service.

The idea was well-received. Each kit contained candles, supplies for Communion, printed orders of worship, and children's activities. People signed up for kits for their households and indicated how many of each item they needed. Then, they picked the kits up in a drive-through at the church building which allowed the ministry staff a chance to see our people and wish them a "Merry Christmas" in person. We had 65 households take a kit, allowing us to minister to at least 230 people. On Christmas Eve, my social media feeds were full of pictures of our people using the kits to celebrate at home. I received grateful texts and emails about how the kits made people feel more connected to their church family and about how the kits made a very abnormal Christmas Eve feel a little more normal. Seeing these kits in use and receiving messages of love and thanks helped the night feel more like normal for me, too. It reminded me that even though we might have been physically separated that night we were still connected through the love of God.

I reflected on the success of our Christmas Eve kits and realized that while I had seen a lot of talk about creating kits for children and youth, I had not really seen much, if any, talk of at-home spiritual growth kits for adults. While it is true, at least in our context, that adults have adapted much more readily to meeting and learning together over Zoom (largely because they do not have to spend 4-6 hours a day on Zoom for school like our children and youth do), I could not help but feel that perhaps we were missing an opportunity for

meaningful spiritual growth by not offering adults tangible materials beyond their Sunday School quarterly.

Once again, troublingly high metrics opened me to the Spirit's creativity. Instead of being able to offer our annual Ash Wednesday Sacred Space where we create hands-on stations that invite reflection and nurture spiritual growth, I pivoted to turning those stations into an at-home experience that could foster spiritual growth for the duration of Lent. Each kit includes a guidebook to lead people through six different spiritual practices based on the worship series we are planning that is centered on Jesus's spiritual life. The kit also contains most of the materials necessary for each practice (I have not included things commonly found at home like pens, Bibles, or colored pencils). People are currently in the process of signing up for kits, which will be distributed at another drive-through event.

In the coming weeks, I am looking forward to hearing how these kits have been helpful to our people along their Lenten journey. I am also wondering how creative offerings like these kits might continue through the rest of the pandemic and beyond. I am thankful for the ways this pandemic has opened me to the Spirit's creativity. I have seen God's creative Spirit at work as I see and hear about the things that friends and colleagues in ministry are doing. I have faith that the Spirit's creative work will continue in us, through us, and around us even as we move into life after the pandemic. May each of us be open to the creative work of the Spirit – pandemic or not.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What creativity has the Spirit prompted in you and your ministry as we have faced changes because of the pandemic?
2. What creative changes might stay with you beyond the pandemic?
3. How can we teach ourselves to be more open to the Spirit's creativity?



About the Author

Rev. Allison Benfield is the Minister for Spiritual Growth at St. John's Baptist Church in Charlotte, NC, USA. She also serves on the BWA's Commission for Transformational Leadership and on the Leadership Board for Baptist Women in Ministry of North Carolina.



The Daily Office in a Contemporary Setting

Alex Pugh | United Kingdom

Andover Baptist Church is composed of around 200 members. Before the pandemic, we experienced an average attendance of 300 people (including children and youth) across two Sunday morning services each week. Keeping connected as a community of faith has been challenging during this time as physical gatherings for worship have not been possible. Consequently, we have transferred our Sunday services online using YouTube as a live stream platform. We have also created an interactive online community group on Facebook and used Zoom to facilitate our small groups and prayer gatherings in addition to regular meetings. The new initiative we have begun is producing daily devotional videos each week using YouTube as the primary platform for broadcast. Each week of devotions (Monday to Friday) is written and filmed by a single person – either a minister, staff member, leader, or member of the congregation. During the Advent and Easter Seasons, we invited other people from our community to each lead a

devotion⁶² as we explored the Christmas and Easter stories together. This enabled around 50 different people to be involved.

Outcome

While our Sunday live stream services on YouTube have been reaching far more people than we ever imagined (in the thousands and other countries), this is fast becoming a place of invitation and exploration for people both inside and outside of our church community. Our daily devotional videos have therefore provided a primary means of communal worship for our more local and integral church community. We have been encouraged to see that, on average, 155 people watch our daily devotional videos on YouTube each day. Viewing figures have ranged between 100 and 517, with higher numbers experienced in the first few weeks.

We found these videos to be effective and powerful ways of keeping our community spiritually “gathered” whilst physically “scattered.” They have also provided a space for a shared experience of daily worship together, and this has instigated a shift away from Sunday services as the sole vehicle for communal worship and spiritual growth. As a result, we have been able to involve a wider variety of people in leading worship and exploring their gifts, particularly the gift of teaching. We feel encouraged that this is a healthier reflection of the priesthood of all believers for our church.

Our daily devotional videos have also proved to be a useful evangelistic tool. Using additional social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to share the videos, we have noticed that people who might not have any experience with church or faith have watched the videos and been encouraged by their content.

After more than a year of producing daily devotional videos, we are sensing a spiritual shift within our church community. During this season of isolation and struggle, people are feeling closer to God and connected with each other in a new way. We have also observed this shift in the prayer life of the church, with positive attendance at regular online prayer gatherings.

Conclusively, we believe that our daily devotional videos are providing a shared experience of communing with God that is positively impacting personal discipleship and spiritual growth within our community as well as increasing our hunger for prayer and intimacy with God.

⁶² The Daily Devotions playlist can be found on the Andover Baptist Church YouTube page here: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnAeNvu198uAFyk-q5mVNeA>.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Whilst it is evident that the daily devotional videos provide an experience of shared spirituality, they do not fit the mold of a daily office in a traditional way. In order to explore the impact of our daily devotional videos, it is necessary to theologically reflect on the practice of the daily office in a contemporary setting – the digital world.

The Digital Space

As Heidi Campbell identifies, churches that have made a transition to the online domain have employed one of three key strategies. The most common strategy is the “transferring” of an experience of worship or church activity. The next most common approach uses a “translation strategy,” which serves to “mirror or modify specific aspects of normal worship practices.”⁶³ A rarer strategy is that of a “transformed” experience which abandons familiar aspects of a particular activity in favor of more bespoke formats suitable to the digital space being used.

Our use of video media to produce and broadcast daily devotional videos represents a translated experience of worship. We have taken elements common to a daily devotional time (selected Scripture, a reflection on the text, and a time of prayer) and presented them in a way that effectively translates it across to the digital realm. We found the use of a video format was particularly successful in engaging people of all ages and also in establishing a connection between the person leading the devotion and those participating.

The Daily Office

Using the digital space for our daily devotions has enabled us to set a new rhythm of spirituality for our church community during this time of being physically scattered. The daily devotional videos have created a shared experience which does not require people to be in the same physical space. This has been particularly important as isolation and loneliness have been a primary concern. It has also encouraged individuals and families to set aside time each day to draw closer to God and listen to the Word, knowing that others in the community are doing likewise.

While daily offices traditionally adhere to specific timings, our daily devotional videos permit a more flexible approach. The videos are broadcast around 8:00

⁶³ Heidi Campbell, *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online* (Digital Religion Publications, 2020), 51-2.

a.m. on YouTube and then subsequently posted on social media forums (Facebook and Instagram), which means that they are available to watch at any time. This flexibility enables more people to engage and form their own pattern of personal daily worship. In this way, our devotional videos are providing a daily office for our community that has been translated into a contemporary setting. Just as the daily offices of the monastic period were seen as “an important framework for the development of personal and corporate spirituality,”⁶⁴ we are finding that daily devotional videos are having a similar impact for our community during this time.

As a church belonging to the Baptist tradition, we do not have any inherited fixed models for daily liturgy and prayer, such as The Book of Common Prayer (1662) or Common Worship (2000) which are widely used across the Anglican Communion today. This affords us a flexibility and creativity in the way that we construct our acts of worship and prayer, both corporately and individually. The idea of modernizing the daily office does not, therefore, dismiss the value of more traditional models. Instead, it seeks to embrace change and agility in order to speak into a contemporary culture while maintaining that “the only absolute rule is to live a life of communion with God.”⁶⁵ This continues to be the focus of our personal and communal times of worship.

Prayer

Loving God, please continue to show us new ways to reach people using your word and truth. Help us to cultivate healthy communities of faith where people grow spiritually in their relationship with you and in community with others. Amen.

For Reflection and Discussion

Following our observations over the past year and in light of theological reflection, some key takeaways can be drawn and questions raised:

1. **Shared Experience of Worship.** Using video media and the digital domain has enabled us to create a shared experience of worship that extends beyond a Sunday service. It has also enabled our community to gather spiritually, and this has encouraged more people to engage in worship. How does a church producing their own daily devotional resources create a gathered and shared experience that is different from other formats? How does this encourage more people to engage (particularly

⁶⁴ Alister McGrath, *Christian Spirituality* (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 129.

⁶⁵ Paul Bradshaw, *Reconstructing Early Christian Worship* (London, SPCK, 2009), 131.

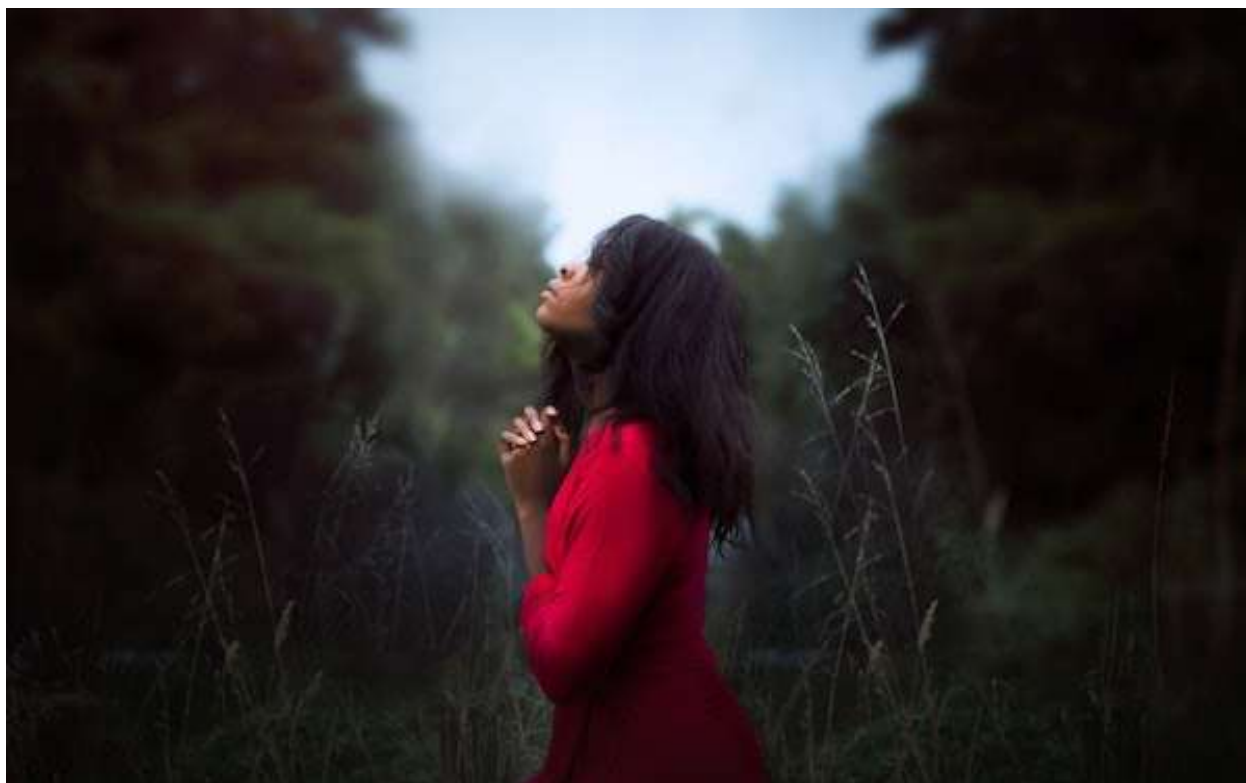
younger generations) and allow us to speak into people's lives on a more regular basis?

2. **Engaging with God.** The daily devotional videos have not only helped our community to stay connected with God on a personal level but also corporately through the variety of individuals who have contributed. How can we continue to encourage this corporate engagement with God as we move forward? Are there other ways to produce daily devotions or a daily office that could do this?
3. **Spiritual Growth.** Daily devotional time is one tool amongst many that promotes spiritual growth. By inviting more people to contribute, we are able to experience the priesthood of all believers in a richer way. Encouraging people to use their gifts to build up the church is really important. How does this new format for daily devotions allow for more people to use their gifts and insight? How can we further cultivate opportunities where the priesthood of all believers can flourish?



About the Author

Alex Pugh is currently studying theology and training for Baptist Ministry at Regent's Park College, Oxford, England. She is a minister-in-training at Andover Baptist Church, and prior to this, served in the British Army for seven and a half years.



United in Christ: The Power of Praying Together

J. Merritt Johnston | USA

"... then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind."

Philippians 2:2 (NIV)

There is unquestionable strength in numbers, but that strength becomes supernatural when people align around a common mission. In a world that all too frequently seeks to show what divides us, the last year has also revealed what can happen when we allow love to unite us.

Unity in Action

On March 6, 2020, I boarded a flight in Washington, D.C. It would be my last for the year. A week later, the United States government declared a national emergency, and sobering reports of the rapid spread of the coronavirus began to pour in from Baptist sisters and brothers around the world. Our team at the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) scrambled to respond to the crisis, but it was

unlike any we had witnessed in our lifetime. For a ministry whose mission is to network Baptists to impact the world for Christ, how could we effectively do so at a time when the world was forcibly isolated?

***When the best step to take is unclear,
the best choice to make is draw near.***

Physical distance mandates had separated humanity, but there was no need to socially distance from our Savior. The best choice was to pray. Our team got to work planning a global prayer call that would feature brief interview segments with ministry leaders from an array of institutions ranging from healthcare to higher education. The call would serve as a kickoff to a 24-hour prayer marathon with an invitation for people to intercede in one-hour time slots. More than 600 people from 44 countries joined the initiative, which led to the formation of a global prayer team and intercession for thousands of prayer requests in the months that followed.

There are few things that can unite the people of God more effectively than praying together. This is the basis for our *Baptists One in Prayer* resource, a weekly email that highlights several countries each week and how to specifically pray for God's work in those areas. Over the course of the year, recipients have the opportunity to pray for every nation in the world as well as for specific needs that arise when disasters strike or religious freedom is threatened. Using the One in Prayer email as our guide, the BWA team gathers each Wednesday for a strategic time of prayer for the world and for one another.

At a time when international travel is limited, you have the opportunity to bring the world to your people.

1. Invite your community to sign up for the weekly *One in Prayer* email at BaptistWorld.org/prayer.
2. Set aside a time for a global prayer focus within your worship services, Sunday School classes, and Bible study gatherings.
3. Seek out and share firsthand prayers from ministry leaders serving in other parts of the world. The BWA shares such prayers in both video and written formats throughout the year.
4. Consider placing a map in a prominent place in your home as both a reminder to pray for the world but also as a teaching tool to encourage children / grandchildren to become global prayer warriors.

While we long for the day when Gospel witness can again take place face-to-face, we must make certain we are ready for the doors God will open. We have

long prayed for the Spirit to ready the hearts of the lost, but we will have missed the mark if do not seize this time to ready ours. The challenges of this pandemic have prepared the way, softening what was once hard soil into fertile ground awaiting harvest.

- Write down the names of five people in your life who are in need of Christ's love.
- Ask God to open doors for you to be a source of encouragement and hope in their lives and for the Spirit to bring Colossians 4:6 (NIV) to bear so that "your conversation [may] be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."

I wholeheartedly believe praying people are powerful people. Imagine the revival that might await if believers around the world are united in prayer in the pursuit of our shared mission.

But may we never forget the object of our pursuit is a Person. A post-pandemic world without our ever-present Savior is a sad world indeed, so let us pray together as Moses did: "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here" (Exodus 33:15, NIV). Lead us on, Lord.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Why do you think prayer is often perceived as the last resort rather than the first step?
2. In your spiritual life, has prayer felt more like a passive step or an active one?
3. What steps can you take to incorporate a global prayer focus into your daily life? Into your community?
4. What lessons have you learned during this season that you can share as part of your Gospel witness with those seeking answers?
5. What steps can and will you take in your community to ensure no one loses sight of our shared mission?

About the Author



J. Merritt Johnston has been in full-time ministry for more than 20 years and has been blessed to lead a nonprofit, provide care as a hospital chaplain, guide communications for a seminary, serve with an international broadcast ministry, shepherd women at a multi-site church, and travel the world teaching God's Word. She is currently honored to serve as the Director of Communications and Media for the Baptist World Alliance. She is married to her college sweetheart and together they are raising their three children to love Jesus and Blue Bell Ice Cream.



A Holistic MISSION GUIDE

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