

Tip of the Month

May, 2020 : **What's Next: How will COVID-19 Shape the Church's Future?**

What's on the horizon for congregations and parishes as we transition from the crisis of the moment to the long-term implications of the coronavirus pandemic? The pandemic has fast-forwarded us into our future at warp speed. Normal has changed forever. With the advent of the digital church, not all of our congregation is physically present. We are learning that telling the dispersed congregation stories of how offerings are used will generate instant gifts with a "donate now" button used during the time of the offering.

Stewardship Team leader the Rev. Larry Smoose offers some thoughts and questions we all need to ponder.

Adjusting to a new reality

As upsetting and frustrating as that may be (and I hope I'm wrong), your job as a leader isn't to fight reality, it's to cooperate with it and leverage it. Fools deny reality, kicking against it to make it do what they hope it will do. The wise co-operate with it, leveraging it for new opportunities. As much as you may want everything to go back to normal, you can't go back to normal when normal has changed forever. The future isn't kind to the unprepared, so prepare.

Please hear the promise in change though: leaders who have the energy, passion, and agility to change now will end up advancing their mission in the future. And, of course, leaders who don't, won't. They may not even survive. This means that the adaptive change lessons we have learned over the last five weeks are our new reality. Specifically, innovative methods for gathering the scattered church, engaging the de-churched, and meeting the unchurched and our neighbors are going to be our primary focus for the rest of this year and probably longer.

Until there is a reliable vaccination for the virus (estimated to be 12-24 months), we should assume that many people would be wary of public gatherings of any type. It will probably be well into 2021 before large-scale physical worship attendance becomes the norm.

Churches have proven themselves imaginative and resilient.

We have learned so much so quickly! We discovered that we can connect with a wider range of church members than we thought possible, provided we are willing to go to them on a regular basis and in multiple formats via the internet. If we have learned this much in five weeks, what will we know five months from now? Our resilience and imagination are encouraging.

Digital church is here to stay.

Because so many churches have gone online for the first time and everyone has made digital their default, the long debate about whether online church is ‘real’ or not is settled. And even if it’s not settled theologically (a few still have questions and objections and always will), it is settled practically.

Of course physical gatherings will return with joy as restrictions lift, but to think that the world will suddenly go back to 100 percent physical when people have experienced digital is highly unlikely for a number of reasons.

- **Churches are experimenting and making digital church better.** Because digital church is the only option now, churches have poured a ton of time and energy into making it better, experimenting with different formats and opportunities and really connecting with people. Many are doing a great job, and it’s only likely to get better in the upcoming months as smaller churches come online and all churches keep innovating.
- **Digital connections have proven meaningful for many.** Sometimes the digital connections have been as or more meaningful than the in-person connections. I realize there will be many who push back against this, but it’s foolish to ignore the fact that people connect more easily online and often admit the truth more readily online than they do in person.
- **Most of the churches who are online now are experiencing growth.** Again, the critics will question how to count the online numbers as real growth and raise 100 other objections, but it’s unmistakable that people who were unaware or disengaged with church a month ago are leaning in now.
- **Virtual worship holds creative new possibilities.** We have learned that we can quickly develop online content at low cost and in sufficient quality. Already, the notion that online worship must be a replica of sanctuary worship is fading. It is remarkable to watch the adaptation that is taking place as people begin to explore the possibilities and creativity of virtual worship.
- **Virtual worship provides new opportunities for generosity.** Already congregations are using more methods of electronic giving, and they are learning that telling people stories of how offerings are used and opportunities for special giving now, will generate instant gifts with a “donate now” screen.

Reliance on the internet is here to stay.

To put digital church back on the shelf in the new normal is to ignore the greatest opportunity the church has today to reach people. And it also ignores the fact that many will want digital to be at least an optional if not a preferred method of engagement where geography and other barriers prevent access.

Will we go back to in-person and physical gatherings and services? Absolutely. But digital isn’t going away. It will continue to grow and advance. We should not expect our folks to walk away from what has become indispensable to them.

Will we cultivate a congregation among those not physically present?

Will congregations and ministers be willing to try to cultivate a congregation outside the core congregation, one that exists primarily via individual interactions with online content and communications rather than physical presence at designated times? Will they be willing to build on their experience with Zoom and other providers in order to structure, promote, and resource online small groups? If so, what might be the impact of such an effort on former methodologies and on a church's reach and influence?

Is our building necessary for delivering our ministry?

Finally, churches are being challenged to have the same conversations as retailers, universities, and hospitals: Is our building a necessity for delivering our services/ministry? We will probably learn to answer this as a polarity exercise. That is, the answer will simultaneously be "yes" and "no." Like retailers, universities and hospitals, we will find ways to be the church both in a physical location AND in a virtual and scattered manner.

We knew this diversification was needed, but the pandemic has fast-forwarded us into our future at warp speed. We will not be able to unlearn what we have learned about being the church going forward. Our new normal will see us regarding our physical location as one of many expressions of our church. In doing so, we will quite possibly become more of the gathered and scattered church Jesus had in mind for his followers.

This article is based on articles by:

[Bill Wilson](#) on May 6, 2020 [Lewis Fellows](#) and
[Carey Nieuwhof](#) on April 29, 2020 [Leading Ideas](#)

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