

Getting our arms around the trauma of COVID 19 in terms of churches coming back together in faith and life: *Commitment*

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Crisis=Circumstances; that is, a crisis is a circumstance to which a person needs to respond and in which he or she believes the response may have life-shaking consequences. Notice that there are **three** elements pastors and church leaders must consider in the COVID 19 crisis:

- The crisis (real or imagined).
- The individual in crisis; and
- The response he or she makes to the crisis.

Wisdom rests in the heart of a man of understanding, but it makes itself known even in the midst of fools. Proverbs 14:33 (ESV)

This series of articles is offered to provide pastors and church leaders insights to bring God’s wisdom into the ongoing task of renewing unity in the church through this current crisis—and those we know are yet to come.

All three require careful consideration in relationship to the obligations to and the promise of God. Pastoral “First Aid” on the spot must focus first to stabilize the individual to buy time to get them more aid. The qualitative damage or deforming due to the experience will vary across the constructs of trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy.

The response he or she makes to the crisis.

For the first time in 12 weeks, my home church here met in the building, again! For the team that had scrambled to bring Sunday morning, midweek children’s ministry three afternoons a week, a virtual small group conversation of Sunday’s message and a Friday praise and worship time... tears welled up as they prepared for the services. And if you and your teams have not yet relaunched, trust me, you will.

But before we wipe those tears of joy... may I ask an especially important question? During the “pause” of at church activities, **“How did you and your team reach-out and try to stay connected?”**

Would you do me a favor, and pause a moment to list your thoughts to the following three aspects?

- **Who have you reached out to?** (keep it first person—you)
- **About what?** (what was that opening thought you used after, “Hi, this is _____”)
- **What was the initial response you received? What other “yes, but....” moments followed?**

Your responses to these three questions will guide our look at **the response you made** toward the crisis of the church dispersed. And, if the aggregate of the conversations I've had these past three months with pastors, church leaders, and attender/members of local churches is any indication, your efforts to personally engage **increased**. That's a good thing! Now the tougher thing is to not STOP doing what you've recently done.

Okay, since we're looking at the challenge of building unity in the regathering church, indulge me with answering another question: **"Is your church a preaching center or a discipleship community?"**

Again, let's zoom in on four related elements:

- **As you hear the phrase "preaching center", what thoughts come to mind?**
- **As you hear the phrase "discipleship community", what thoughts come to mind?**
- **Which most closely describes your church BEFORE the pandemic? Be specific.**
- **Which most closely describes how you desire your church to bridge this either/or world, now?**

The preaching of God's Word is essential for life transformation but preaching alone is not enough to change lives and families. A preaching center **and** discipleship community work in tandem from the pulpit and the living room. A transformational church **is both** a preaching center and discipleship community. And family ministry (or *oikos* ministry) merits some close consideration as a means to add, rather than subtract without overwhelming you or your staff.

Let me share some context, COVID 19 Side-Effects. Again, by way of the aggregate conversations with pastors, church leaders and attenders/members of local churches I've had contact with there are some surprising side-effects—and I'm not speaking of those with the virus.

- Suicides are up
- Anger problems are up
- Fear and anxiety are up
- Medication usage is up
- Marital issues are on the increase
- Familiar dysfunction is on the rise
- General divisiveness and discord are up
- Church (cyber) attendance has increased
- Trust in government is father down

The Next Pivot required

- One biblical counselor friend did not like the idea of counseling by text or email, much less Facetime or Zoom. Then he did it. As he returns to his church, he now says he may never counsel from that desk again, as a **commitment** to a possible means of grace for some folks.

- An associate pastor did not know how to use Zoom technology, so he **committed** to learn it. In an authentic moment downstream in our conversation, he said this has been more vital to care for his flock than quibble over the means.
- A church member who worked alongside his pastor in the church’s marriage ministry said he learned how to record and publish online 3-minute *Better Together* videos to lead off at-home date nights. Involvement in this core element of family ministry has never been higher!
- I started (reluctantly) thinking through the redemptive use of technology in 2008, using an anonymous email format to come alongside hurt people who felt they were going unheard in their local churches. The Lord has done fantastic things through this non-traditional way of doing ministry.

When this is over, “**why would we stop this commitment? And what disunity, might that spark?**”

Okay, let me ask the obvious things behind the things:

- **How am I supposed to do everything I did during COVID while also doing everything I did before COVID?**
- **How might thinking through the ministry delivery channels of one-to-many; one-to-some; and one-to-one offer wisdom in how to survive the next pivot?**
- **How might adding one component of family/*oikos* ministry allow us to test-drive this, first?**

When it’s over, and some form of “**I now have a scar, but not an open sore**” degree of healing will come! Millions of Christians will return to their church buildings. We will return to the conventional biblical and historical ways of doing church—I have no doubt. Plus, we will have learned a few other avenues to care for God’s people and reaching the lost.

The response of those returning is the mystery behind the mystery.

In a pre COVID culture often described as *the fear of missing out culture*”, we found that much of our communication within our church only flourished when accompanied by “*the assumption of a future.*” Now, more than ever, whatever we seek to communicate from this point forward must express a **commitment** between individuals, must foster feelings of empowerment and positive self-image.

Again, lessons learned with marriages. Individuals who felt a secure bond with their spouse were given a list of adjectives to describe themselves. The more connected they felt toward his or her spouse, the more positive the trait he or she picked out for themselves. These same individuals were honest to admit they didn’t live up to all their ideals but still felt good about themselves based on the overall security of their relationship.

Security and oneness are at the heart of the Genesis account of God’s intention for marriage: *“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh* (Genesis 2:24, ESV).

Translate this into church commitment. What we saw in the past was a similar feeling of a secure bond with their church also the more positive they felt about themselves because of their involvement. The assumption of a future is what helps a couple get past “the inevitability of conflict”. Conflict is common to all forms of relationships... including those within the local church. What surprises so many Christians is that simply being followers of Christ does not exempt us from conflict.

The Apostle Paul exhorts the Philippians to *“complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind”* (Philippians 2:2, ESV), but yet, he still had to intervene in a disagreement between Euodia and Syntyche saying, *“I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord”* (Philippians 4:2, ESV).

Knowing both you and I are in this for the long haul mirrors a couple saying, “I ain’t going anywhere, so let’s work this out.” In a culture that says the only way to survive the stress and pressure of relationships is to have a back door and golden parachute, little wonder the same extends to church relationships.

As we spill more and more people into our buildings over the coming weeks, *mindfulness* and lowering *expectations* will not be enough by themselves—*commitment* must be clearly conveyed even if, it isn’t immediately mutual.