

BEYOND COVID-19

FIVE
MOVES CHURCHES
SHOULD PLAN
NOW!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR


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He has published over 25 books and numerous articles that have been translated to Spanish, Korean, and Afrikaans. His most recent books address ministry applications for demographic trends and lifestyle segments: ***See, Know, and Serve; Worship Ways, Spiritual Leadership; Strategic Thinking;*** and ***Sideline Church: Bridging the Chasms between Churches and Cultures.***

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Good leaders in all sectors, including the religious sector, are all feeling overwhelmed by the tactical adjustments they need to make to sustain their organizations and achieve their goals. Great leaders are looking further into the future. There is going to be a “new normal” and nobody knows for sure what it will look like. Some challenges are becoming clear, however. And so are the solutions.

CHALLENGE

1

Social distancing among people may fade, but social distancing from worship attendance will linger.

The next epidemic may or may not be worse, but it is just around the corner. This means people will be ever more selective about which face-to-face gatherings are essential or non-essential. Churches that have prided themselves on being agents for social assimilation (e.g. all those churches that count “friendliness” as their top core value) will be particularly hard hit. Even older late-adopters are discovering that social media and internet conversation can be as good as, or even better than, handshakes with the pastor, passing the peace in the pews, and post-worship chatter over coffee.

SOLUTIONS:

Churches need to go to the next level of internet communication. I call it a “3-D” level. Many churches have learned to do two-dimensional worship services. In other words, they live stream or record/share worship services online. However, these remain presentational from speaker/performer to audience. Three-dimensional worship generates dialogue and more personal interaction. For example:

- 1.** Sermons can be broken into smaller pieces, allowing time for online participants to text, email, or phone questions to the speaker for immediate response. (You will need a volunteer to monitor incoming questions, prioritize them, and set them before the speaker). These pauses might be filled with special music.
- 2.** Online Holy Communion may or may not be permitted in your tradition, but you can still shape worship around an Agape Feast that brings households or small groups together for food, conversation, and inspiration around their own table set with bread and wine.
- 3.** Intercessory prayer can be led by a team rather than an individual, with each team member able to receive real-time texts of prayer requests that can be shared online. Note that these teams will need to be trained to filter messages to protect confidentiality. The more diverse the team by age, gender, culture, and language the more effective community prayers will be.

There are a host of social media platforms that can provide quick, easy, real-time involvement for long-distance participation.

CHALLENGE

2

Clergy workloads will grow, but work goals will change.

The most time-consuming activities for clergy are meetings, pastoral care and counseling, and sermon preparation. Meetings will be fewer, briefer, smaller, and mostly online; healthcare institutions will limit visitation and counseling will shift to confidential audio/video internet platforms; and presentational communication skills will depreciate in value. Traditionally trained clergy over the age of 45 will be hardest hit because success will no longer be measured by universal harmony, balanced budgets, and attendance statistics, but by rigorous accountability, mission-driven but manageable deficits, and volunteerism.

SOLUTIONS:

The most important strategy is to develop small, online mutual support groups for overwhelmed clergy, led by trained regional leaders or CEO clergy used for efficient meetings and multi-tasking. Furthermore, just as banks and major retailers are deferring payments, so also denominations need to set aside their demands for institutional growth and allow clergy to relax. Already there are online training classes for webinars. Clergy who are experienced with online technology, dialogical preaching, and social media platforms can help their colleagues. Physicians and therapists are already shifting to specialized online platforms that protect confidentiality, which you can also use for counseling.

CHALLENGE

3

Economic recession will dramatically impact church budgets.

Bailouts and stimulus packages will only last so long, and households across the U.S. will be reprioritizing personal budgets. Charities most likely to receive money are those with the least overhead costs in property and personnel, the most visible impact on the local community, and the greatest opportunities for hands-on personal involvement. Churches will struggle to compete with efficient non-profits, healthcare institutions, and universities. Obviously recession will impact young, single, and family households. But it will also impact the older households who have been the biggest givers to church. This is because more and more households will become multi-generational as children are forced to return home and live with parents.

SOLUTIONS:

Churches need to stop making tiny charitable donations to a wide range of denominational programs and personal pet projects and concentrate their financial resources to create a signature outreach ministry. This is a high-impact outreach ministry that targets one specific need or group of people, establishes your reputation in the wider social service world and involves a large number of enthusiastic, hands-on volunteers from within the worshipping congregation. These major outreach ministries sometimes become registered 501(c)3 non-profits. When you place fundraising for outreach above institutional operations, overall giving goes up.

CHALLENGE

4

Widespread unemployment (or under-employment) will last a long time, with increasing social tensions between "haves" and "have-nots" in both church and community.

The lack of full-time and/or meaningful work has already become a major source of tension between Gen X and Y (least represented in the church) and baby boomers (most represented in the church). That means people under 45 will become even angrier with people over 45 and more alienated from the church. But the tensions will not be just generational. The most hard-hit occupations will be in construction, farming, food service, healthcare support, transportation, maintenance, and security. Established churches tend to be top-heavy with occupations in management, administration, education, professional specialties, and pensioners.

SOLUTIONS:

Church leaders (especially staff, boards, and personnel committees) need to become very familiar with the lifestyle segments within and beyond the church. Whatever the vocalized anger aimed at your church, you can understand and interpret the underlying circumstances behind it. Most churches have limited financial resources to give to households in need, but the deeper need is for unemployed people to have something meaningful to do in order to sustain hope and self-worth. Volunteer empowerment will become even more important. Organize volunteers into true teams that do more than tasks. Constantly celebrate and honor volunteers and stop taking them for granted.

Churches can also refocus or retool small group ministries to become mutual support groups for un- or under-employed people. Organize these groups using affinities of occupation and not by geographical proximity to each other. Motivated people will travel some distance to be with the group that understands them best. Many of these groups will need trained leaders, but even if leadership is rotated, the small groups will need constant coaching from the pastor or staff.

CHALLENGE

5

“Personal religion” will soar as frustration with dogmatic and ideological polarization grows.

Resentment toward churches that refuse to follow social distancing guidelines during the pandemic, endangering the health of entire communities, is just the tip of the iceberg. People are personalizing religion; adapting rituals, blending beliefs, and revising personal values in countless ways. Church outsiders increasingly resent external authorities telling them what to think and how to behave. Church insiders increasingly resent religious organizations wasting resources on pointless conventions, political lobbying, and membership privileges. Ten years ago the seekers were visitors to the church; today the seekers are members leaving the church. Thirst for God will grow. Church closures will accelerate, not due to lack of financial resources, but due to lack of public respect.

SOLUTIONS:

Church leaders should rethink their assumptions and habits in leadership development program planning.

1. Preservation of “friendliness” will be replaced by intentional “accountability” for both staff and members. Every church should have a grievance policy similar to that of hospitals and non-profits, universal processes for hiring/acquiring leaders, training and coaching, and performance evaluation. Pastors and personnel committees should maintain confidential logs dating problems, continuing education, and changes so that staff can be fired and volunteers can be dismissed without fears of lawsuits or fistfights.
2. Expectations for dogmatic agreement, ideological assent, and unquestioning obedience will be replaced by openness to different perspectives, flexibility in diverse circumstances, and gestures of reconciliation and acceptance. The science of empathy and the art of listening will be required as a condition for both paid and unpaid leadership.

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