

In This Season of Social Distancing, We Still Need Each Other

During the coronavirus panic, we were told to stay away from crowds, avoid handshakes, avoid travel, use plenty of sanitizer and live in isolation. Introverts probably loved this, but I was miserable. I couldn't visit my mother in her nursing home, I had to cancel trips, and a friend's father's funeral was postponed. I know we have to use wisdom to avoid contagion. But I was sad when churches had to cancel meetings and stream online. Watching church on a screen is not the same as sitting next to human beings who ask you how you are doing, offer hugs and tell you they love you.

My wife and I started visiting different churches a few months ago. We are in search of a place to call home. This isn't an easy process for a traveling minister like me. I'm gone many weekends, so I can't commit to certain duties at a local church, and I don't feel as connected as those who are there every week.

But I need a place to belong, where I can hear God's Word and experience the support of a spiritual family. During our recent journey, we've visited all kinds of churches—Baptist and Baptistical, charismatic and evangelical, denominational and non-denominational. We've been in black, white and blended churches; we've attended churches with older congregations as well as a church with lots of excited teens who crowd the altar during worship. What I've seen during our spiritual tour of Troup County, Georgia, has encouraged me so much. I've experienced God's family in all of its diversity, with all of its quirks and warts and weaknesses. I'm certainly not looking for a perfect church. (And I know if there were such a thing, it wouldn't remain perfect once I joined it.)

What thrills me is that, even though churches aren't perfect, God has placed His special people everywhere. No matter where I go all over the United States, there are faithful congregations providing a witness of Jesus Christ. They are winning new converts, discipling new believers, feeding the homeless, running women's shelters, giving out book bags at schools, evangelizing college campuses, caring for prisoners, providing counseling services and sending teams on foreign mission fields. And during the coronavirus crisis these same churches offered free lunches to students affected by school closures and provided other services to people who were falling through the cracks.

Many American churches today have big struggles. We can't meet our budgets; we can't recruit enough volunteers; we want to grow, but we watch people leave through the back door. Some of our leaders struggle with depression. And often our witness is tainted by hypocrisy. Yet God still dwells in the midst of His flawed people, in good times and bad.

I hear lots of complaints about church. Some people have even given up on it. People gripe about music styles, sermon length, meeting times or an unpopular decision by the pastor. Sometimes people just get offended at another church member and storm out. Since the global church began 2,000 years ago, we've been tossed and battered by theological divisions, heresies, immature leadership, strife, scandal, gossip and—maybe the worst problem—spiritual complacency that has quenched the fire of the Holy Spirit.

And yet the church survives. With all of our problems, the gates of hell have not prevailed against us. Today I'm so thankful that Jesus dwells among His people. He speaks to us when we gather, whether we meet in a 5,000-seat megachurch, a traditional building with pews, a converted warehouse, a movie theater or a home with seating for only 10 worshippers.

Psalm 84:1-2a (NASB) says, "How lovely are your dwelling

places, O Lord of hosts! My soul longed and even yearned for the courts of the Lord.” You won’t yearn for God’s house if you don’t first realize how lovely it is. Don’t focus on the problems or nitpick about things you want to change. Instead, embrace the people who provide your spiritual support network as a gift from the Lord. Psalm 122:1 says, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’” Do you love the church? Or have you distanced yourself from God’s people? Once the coronavirus scare is over, don’t find another excuse to keep your distance. If you love God, you must also love His people. I encourage you to rediscover why God created you for community.

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Evangelism Is Possible—Even in a Pandemic

Two months before I ever heard the word “coronavirus,” I stopped at a convenience store near my house to fill up my car

with gas. When I went inside to grab a few items, I noticed the clerk had a thick Indian accent. "What part of India are you from?" I asked.

The man seemed surprised that I knew his ethnicity. "You know India?"

I told him I had visited there four times, and that I had good friends in several cities in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Kerala. "I am from Hyderabad," he told me as he gave me my change.

"Oh, so you speak Telegu," I said. Now I had the man's full attention. He couldn't believe that a guy from Georgia knew anything about his country or his language. He seemed surprised that I cared.

In that moment all the other customers left the store, and I was able to have a focused conversation with my new friend. I learned that his name is Mahipal, that he has a wife and family back home and that he grew up in a nominal Christian family. When I explained that I am a minister, and that I have some close disciples in Hyderabad, he asked me point-blank: "Would you disciple me?"

That began a fascinating friendship that got more interesting when the coronavirus pandemic shut down all my travels and forced most businesses to close. Fortunately for Mahipal, his store is considered an essential business, so it stayed open. And since he works seven days a week, I started visiting him on most mornings to help him grow in his faith.

Mahipal wears a mask and gloves on the job, and we stay 6 feet away from each other to comply with pandemic rules. We greet each other with elbow bumps instead of hugs.

But social distancing has not stopped the Holy Spirit from working in this man's life. We normally sit at a table in the back of his store, near the video slot machines, to talk about prayer, the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the differences

between Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Mahipal often has to run to the counter to sell cigarettes, snacks or lottery tickets to customers, but then he comes back to read another Bible verse or to ask another question.

This weekend I'll be baptizing Mahipal privately at a local church in my city, while a handful of friends watch.

I call this my "pandemic miracle," because I never would have expected to take on such an important ministry assignment when the world was in total lockdown. But Mahipal helped me understand that even in a world crisis, when people are sheltering in place, God is still drawing people to Himself.

Did you ever consider the fact that God does not keep His distance from us? John 4:23 says the Father "seeks" true worshipers. The Greek word used here means "to desire, crave or strive after." Jesus also told us that He "has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). God was not halfhearted when He came looking for you. He was on a desperate search!

I don't know how long this pandemic will last. But whether it is a matter of weeks or months, please don't close your heart to the needs of the people around you. Just because we are protecting ourselves from contagion doesn't mean you can't share the gospel with someone—even if you are wearing a mask or talking through a Plexiglas shield.

People are more spiritually open in times of crisis. They are processing their fears, losing sleep because of anxiety and thinking about the finality of death. Many are concerned about loved ones who are infected. Others have lost their jobs or struggling to pay bills. And others are depressed because of loneliness.

There may be people all around you who are whispering silent prayers, such as, "God, if You are real, show me what to do!" You could be the answer to their prayer.

Just because you are social distancing doesn't mean you should close your heart to the needs around you. You can stay 6 feet away from a person and still get close. Ask questions, probe hearts, show concern and offer prayers for people who feel unsettled and insecure in this crazy season. If God is drawing them to Himself, don't ignore the call to share your faith. {eoa}

In This Time of Social Distancing, Call Your Friends

I have a friend in Virginia—I'll call him "Kevin"—who is struggling with depression. He lost his job because his company isn't an "essential" business. A part-time pastor, Kevin had big dreams about growing his young church, but now he's struggling to connect with his congregation through social media and online broadcasts.

Another friend in Texas, "Mike," is dealing with overwhelming anxiety. Daily news reports about infections and death tolls keep him up at night. This past weekend, he couldn't sleep because he was afraid he might be getting a fever. His temperature is normal, but his worries are making him sick.

Meanwhile I've received too many messages to count from foreign friends who don't know where their next meal will come from. In Uganda, police are beating people with canes if they go into the streets. In India, where there are only 9,100 confirmed cases of the virus in a nation of one billion, countless people are out of work because the government has

put the whole country on lockdown.

I understand the drastic measures. Social distancing has proven to be a helpful strategy to reduce the spread of the virus. But health officials aren't talking enough about the psychological toll this crisis is having on people who are forced to stay at home. It almost seems the "cure" for the coronavirus is worse than the disease itself.

More than 17 million Americans have filed for unemployment in the past four weeks. But those mind-boggling numbers don't begin to reveal the emotional impact of closed restaurants and stores, shuttered factories and padlocked schools.

Counselors say the number of calls to suicide hotlines has skyrocketed since the virus crisis began. Many of the calls are from young people who can't handle the fact that normal life has been canceled.

"It's so scary, it's almost like ... I would rather be dead," said Danielle Sinay, a 28-year-old writer from Brooklyn, New York, who has a history of suicidal thoughts. "I mean, I wouldn't be, but sometimes I get so scared it feels like that."

Sinay told *USA Today* last month that the disruptions in her routine and the uncertainties surrounding the pandemic have triggered previous problems with panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. She is not alone. People with preexisting mental problems are particularly vulnerable to thoughts of suicide.

The coronavirus has created a perfect storm. It requires us to live in isolation to stay healthy—but the isolation causes a new set of problems. The last thing a person with depression or anxiety disorder should do is hide in a house alone. Yet 28% of households in the United States are single people who live by themselves.

So I'm sending out a plea. While you are diligent to wash your hands, use hand sanitizer and stay 6 feet away from strangers in the grocery store, please make every effort to check on your friends, family and neighbors to make sure they are coping with the emotional effects of this pandemic. Make phone calls or send texts and make sure people know you are there to help them if they need support. And schedule longer calls with people who are struggling with anxiety or depression.

In the New Testament there are 59 "one another" verses that command us to take care of each other. We have been called to live in community—in good times and, yes, during pandemics. We don't have room to list all the verses here, but I picked eight that are particularly appropriate for this situation:

1. **"Encourage one another" and "build up one another"** (1 Thess. 5:11, NASB). Your words can literally spark hope in someone who is in despair. Just the sound of your voice can boost their morale.
2. **"Bear one another's burdens"** (Gal. 6:2a). Some people are collapsing under the weight of their emotional pain. You can help them carry it. This verse is complemented by Romans 15:1, which says: "Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves." The unselfish thing to do is to help your friends when they are struggling.
3. **"Honor one another above yourselves"** (Rom. 12:10b, NIV). You show honor when you put your friend's well-being above your own. Instead of bingeing on Netflix every night during this crisis, reach out and be a friend. And don't forget to show honor to those who are working in hospitals and essential jobs during the pandemic. They deserve some thanks.
4. **"May ... your love increase and overflow for each other"** (1 Thess. 3:12). It's selfish to hide in your house during this crisis while people you know are feeling

lonely or afraid. Go the extra mile and show genuine concern.

5. **“Be kind and compassionate to one another”** (Eph. 4:32). Social distancing doesn’t prevent you from mailing packages, cards, letters, gifts or food items to the people you love. What we do for each other during this crisis will be long remembered.
 6. **“Greet one another with a holy kiss”** (Rom. 16:16). We can’t kiss each other in the middle of a pandemic. But a warm greeting, through text, voice call or FaceTime will spread true joy and help people feel more optimistic.
 7. **“Pray for each other”** (James 5:16b). I have a friend from India who recently became a believer in Christ. Every day during this pandemic, I’ve been stopping by the store where he works so I can pray with him. I’ve watched his fears melt each time we pray. You can do the same for friends who are struggling.
 8. **“Love one another”** (1 John 3:11b). God’s love is more powerful than a virus. Don’t be afraid to share His love with the people around you. The simple act of a phone call could stop someone from ending his or her life. The love you spread could “go viral” in the best way by inspiring others to spread the compassion of Jesus.
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God Is Calling All Prayer Warriors to Deploy!

We are living in one of the most uncomfortable times I've ever known. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the world to its knees. Workplaces are closed. Hospitals are overcrowded. The global economy teeters on the edge of collapse while everyone shelters in place. And fear is spreading faster than the virus itself.

Meanwhile, the normally bustling congregations of America are eerily quiet. All gatherings are canceled—including funerals. Many churches are conducting outreaches and food distribution, but social distancing makes any event challenging. Pastors are preaching their Sunday sermons into video cameras while their auditoriums are empty.

It's a strange time—and the anxiety has triggered so many questions. *Is this the end of the world? Is the coronavirus God's judgment? Are globalist world leaders going to take over the world with vaccines and computer chips?* People are wringing their hands and making themselves sick by listening to doom-and-gloom predictions and negative news reports.

Today I asked the Holy Spirit to help me understand what's going on, and how He wants the church to respond to this crisis. As I prayed in the spirit, I sensed He spoke to me: "Remember Rees Howells—and pray like he prayed."

Rees Howells was a humble missionary who established the Bible College of Wales in 1924. During the years leading up to World War II, and during that awful conflict, he led his students to pray for the defeat of dictators like Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. They also prayed fervently for Allied forces during the Battle of Britain, Dunkirk and D-Day. (Howells even wrote a book in 1939 called *God Challenges the Dictators*, in which

he prophesied the defeat of Nazi and communist regimes.)

Before his death in 1950, Howells became a model of what prayer can accomplish. Like Daniel, Ezekiel and Elijah, Howells believed God can use one person's faith-filled prayers to change history. And like the apostle Paul, Howells taught that Christians must engage in intense spiritual warfare against invisible demonic forces.

Richard A. Maton, who wrote a biography of Howells' son called *Samuel Rees Howells, A Life of Intercession*, said: "Rees Howells was taught by the Holy Spirit that any person, government or international situation that hindered the spread of the gospel would become a legitimate target to be challenged and defeated through intercession. It was the Lord's will for the gospel to go to every person, and anything that got in the way of God's plan had to be confronted."

If there were ever a time in modern history when we need the faith of Rees Howells, it is in 2020—when so many dark spiritual powers are conspiring to stop the third great spiritual awakening that has been prophesied. All hell has been unleashed, and our comfortable Western churches cannot hope to defeat this enemy with our coffee bars, 20-minute sermons and moral compromise. We must become a praying church again. If we hope to engage the enemy, we must allow God to shake everything that can be shaken.

I don't feel qualified to be an intercessor of the same caliber as Rees Howells, but I'm asking God to train me for battle. I'm willing to be deployed in this crisis moment. Are you willing to be a spiritual warrior? Here are a few ways you can begin:

1. **Become more aggressive.** Status quo prayers won't be enough in seasons of spiritual battle. There is a time to go to war in the spirit, and it requires a militant attitude toward the enemy. When Elisha told King Joash

to take arrows and strike the ground, in preparation for a battle, the king halfheartedly hit the ground only three times. Elisha said: "You should have struck it five or six times. Then you would have stricken Aram until you had finished them" (2 Kings 13:18-19). Too often we are satisfied with small victories because we didn't pray with enough intensity.

2. **Ask big.** We can limit what God wants to do in the earth by praying in a puny way. Why would we settle for less when God can do the impossible? Elijah asked God to withhold the rain, and the rain stopped for three years. Then he prayed again and the rain returned. Rees Howells and his small band of prayer warriors in Wales asked God to remove Adolf Hitler from power. We must stop being so timid and begin to ask for global miracles.
3. **Combine fasting with prayer.** Fasting is not a way to bribe God. You do not need to forfeit food to get His attention. But fasting helps you focus on the Lord—and it intensifies prayer power. There are certain spiritual obstacles that need an extra push. When speaking of a demon that needed to be cast out, Jesus told His disciples: "But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting" (Matt. 17:21). With all of us sheltering in our homes, this is the perfect time to fast and pray.
4. **Do a night watch.** There are moments in our lives when the Lord may woo us to spend time with Him in the night hours. In Song of Solomon, the bride hears her beloved calling her to get out of bed (5:2-6) and she doesn't respond quickly enough. Many of us are too distracted by the busyness of life to hear God call us to a season of prayer. Yet the Lord is looking for people who will listen to His battle secrets. Will you let Him pray through you?
5. **Go to the depths of prayer.** People who have allowed God to use them in intercession know that certain situations require travail. This is not easy prayer—it is the

spiritual equivalent of childbirth! When Elijah prayed for rain to end a seven-year drought, the Bible says he “threw himself down on the ground and put his face between his knees” (1 Kings 18:42). It is travailing prayer that will bring a true, world-changing outpouring of God’s Spirit.

The apostle Paul also knew this level of agonizing travail, and he told the Romans that the Holy Spirit “intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26). We are invited to know the depths of prayer, but too often we are too busy, too lazy or too distracted to venture into the unknown realms of true spiritual maturity.

When Rees Howells engaged the spiritual forces operating in Nazi Germany, he said: “This is the battle of the ages, and victory here means victory for millions of people.” We, too, must know that millions of souls are hanging in the balance. If we really want the world to find Jesus in the midst of this dark crisis, we must allow the Holy Spirit to pray through us in a deeper, messier and noisier way. Please enlist now.

It Has Happened Before: Remember the 1918 Pandemic

The coronavirus crisis has traumatized us all. We now live in a weird world of medical masks, ventilators, drive-through-only restaurants, social distancing and online church services. We’ve canceled schools, closed businesses and courthouses, shut down theaters, postponed concerts, axed all

sporting events and even shuttered Disney World. It feels like we're trapped in a bad dream.

As we shelter in place, listening to media reports of a rising death toll, some people are wondering if the world is about to end.

I have some good news. In short, no—I can assure you the world isn't ending. This virus will run its course, and the world will eventually go back to work. There is life after COVID-19.

How can I say that with such assurance? Because I read history, and I know we're not the only generation to endure a pandemic. The world has survived dozens of plagues including the Black Death (which killed an estimated 60 million), the smallpox outbreak of 1520, the yellow fever outbreak of the late 1800s, the "Third Plague" of 1855 and the notorious Spanish flu pandemic of 1918-1919.

The Spanish flu killed between 40 to 50 million people globally, or about 4% of the world's population at that time. The fatalities included an estimated 675,000 Americans. Here are a few facts about that plague, in case you were asleep when it was discussed in history class:

—Americans didn't know how to fight the plague, and we didn't have access to the medicines we have today. But there were public health warnings, quarantines, social distancing and lots of masks. People were especially advised not to spit in public. In New York City, Boy Scouts patrolled the streets, politely handing spitters printed cards that read: "You are in violation of the Sanitary Code."

—Pennsylvania, Colorado and Maryland had the highest death rates. Health care workers set up makeshift tent hospitals in fields. Philadelphia was hit particularly hard by the Spanish flu. Bodies lay in the streets and in morgues for days there. Newspaper ads urged people to wash their hands.

–People had superstitious ideas about how to fight the virus. Some people believed wearing onions around their necks would ward it off. There was also a rumor that drinking whiskey could protect you from it! Children sang a popular skip-rope rhyme in those days. It went like this: “I had a little bird/
Its name was Enza/ I opened the window/ And in-flu-Enza.”

–Local health officials urged people to stay away from crowds. Schools, public meetings and church services were canceled for weeks. However, people didn’t know as much about hygiene in those days, so transmission rates were far worse than what we are experiencing today.

I’ve been fascinated by the way churches responded to the Spanish flu. Christian leaders, including Pentecostals, obeyed local health officials and closed their churches to prevent contagion. A.J. Tomlinson, leader of the Church of God denomination, wrote this in his diary on Nov. 13, 1918: “The government closed all churches and public gatherings of every kind. We missed four Sundays, but commenced again last Sunday. ... During the last few weeks, many people have died of influenza. It is remarkable, however, how few of our people have died with it.”

G. F. Taylor, an early leader of the Pentecostal Holiness denomination, wrote in his diary on Oct. 31, 1918: “The Influenza seems to have set everything out of joint all over the country. There never was such great distress prevailing over the United States as there has been for the last month. Many requests have poured into [our] office for prayer. We have been trying to take them all to God.”

Historian Daniel D. Isgrigg noted in a recent article that the Spanish flu ravaged the city of Springfield, Missouri, where the Assemblies of God has its international offices. Although AG leaders viewed the disease as direct resistance to God’s work, they closed churches and revival services, and obeyed health department mandates.

AG leaders wrote: "All churches, missions, etc., including the Assembly of God, are closed because of the scourge of Spanish Influenza that is raging in the town. ... We are finding it a splendid opportunity to devote additional time to prayer for our missionaries, and for the soldier boys [who were fighting in World War I], and for rain all over the world in this time of the Latter Rain. Where assemblies are closed, let the saints devote the time they would spend at meeting to the Word and to prayer."

In the pages of the AG's *Pentecostal Evangel*, there were reports of healings and miraculous protection from the virus, as well as somber accounts of how the Spanish flu ravaged foreign nations and killed AG missionaries.

What can we learn from a plague that occurred 102 years ago? Our spiritual ancestors didn't let the Spanish flu stop them. They shut their church services down briefly to stop the spread of the virus, but they continued praying for the sick. They kept shining the light of the gospel in a dark season. And they used their extra time in quarantine to pray and draw closer to God.

They didn't view the virus as a sign of the end of the world, or as an excuse to give up. They knew they had a world to reach for Christ. They stopped their work briefly until the angel of death passed over. Then they went back into the harvest fields with renewed faith. I pray we will do the same.
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7 Ways to Pray During This Pandemic

The Holy Spirit didn't tell me in advance about the coronavirus pandemic. I was just as shocked as everyone else when I realized that a deadly virus outbreak in China would shut down the world.

But at the beginning of 2020 when I spent some time praying for the year, the Lord gave me three words. He said simply: "Rest. Reign. Receive."

I wrote those words down in my journal, prayed about them and tucked them away. I suspected they would become clearer as the year progressed. The message suddenly made sense in early March, when my schedule was canceled and I was forced into an unscheduled sabbatical!

I was especially intrigued by the word "reign." I felt God was calling me to better understand my authority in Christ. The Bible says we have been made both "kings and priests unto God," (see Rev. 1:6 and 5:10, KJV), and we have been "seated ... with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus," according to Ephesians 2:6 (NASB).

I don't typically think of myself as a king. But if I am the King's son, then I am His heir—and I am invited to reign with him. This is clearly what Jesus meant when He told us: "If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it" (John 14:14). We are invited to extend His rule over the earth through prayer. He has given us His authority. He invites us to use it.

That's the posture I'm taking as I pray for this global crisis. I'm praying from a position of kingly authority. If I pray according to His will, He will use my prayers to establish His kingdom on earth! Here are seven ways I'm praying for the coronavirus pandemic. I invite you to join me.

1. **Take authority over the virus.** Jesus told His disciples He had given them “authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy” (Luke 10:19a). That includes viruses! Sickness and disease are from Satan. Rebuke the virus and command it to die. It is under our feet. As we pray, the number of cases will diminish, along with the number of deaths, and the spread of the virus will stop.
2. **Pray for peace to replace anxiety and fear.** Today, it seems that worry is more contagious than the virus itself. People are paralyzed by fear of getting infected, by the loss of a job or by lines at the grocery store. People are even hoarding food and toilet paper! Yet 2 Timothy 1:7a (NKJV) says: “For God has not given us a spirit of fear.” Fear is not from God. We can use wisdom to minimize contagion, but people today are overreacting in irrational ways. Ask God to send His peace to troubled communities.
3. **Pray for miraculous healings for those infected.** I’m grateful for new drugs that can stop this virus, and we can pray for medical researchers to discover these cures quickly. But let’s remember that Jesus is the source of divine healing. When He began His ministry, Peter’s mother-in-law was cured of a fever—and by the end of the day, “He healed many who were ill with various diseases” (Mark 1:34a). Let’s pray for an outbreak of supernatural healing!
4. **Pray for the traumatized younger generation.** I am deeply concerned for our high school and college students because this pandemic has traumatized them. Schools have closed, all sports have been canceled and graduations have been postponed. Many are struggling with depression and thoughts of suicide. There’s something special about this generation of youth—and the enemy has targeted them. Rebuke the enemy’s plan and ask God to raise up

this special group of young people to accomplish God's purpose.

5. **Pray for unity to replace divisiveness.** It's disheartening to see how people are biting each other's heads off during this crisis. Fights have even broken out in grocery stores. Meanwhile the media continues to inject tons of negativity into our national conversation, and politicians are blaming each other instead of working together across party lines. Let's stand in the gap and ask for healing in our land. May God forgive us for our hatefulness. I'm praying that media leaders will apologize for making this crisis worse by spreading so much toxic venom.
6. **Pray for economic stability.** This microscopic virus has brought us to our knees. Some of the world's biggest corporations are edging toward bankruptcy. Millions of people are out of work because their jobs are not considered "essential" in the middle of a pandemic. But I don't believe God wants to starve us. Pray that the virus will weaken quickly so we can get back to work. And pray that America's government and business leaders will depend on God's wisdom when we restart the marketplace.
7. **Pray that the church will shine in the darkness.** This has been a strange month for churches around the world. Our buildings were closed, but ministry continued—through online gatherings, small group Bible studies, outreaches to the poor and homeless, school lunch programs and a general outpouring of compassion. This isn't a time for the church to hide. Even though social distancing keeps us farther away from people than normal, pray that we will discover creative ways to share the gospel with a world that is overwhelmed by bad news.

Many Christians around the country have begun to pray that

this virus will be vanquished by Resurrection Sunday, which is April 12. I have circled that day in red on my calendar. I am praying for an end to this pandemic within 18 days. Easter is a celebration of the day Jesus conquered death. May it also be the day we dance in the streets as we witness an end to this plague.

How You and Your Church Can Thrive During a Pandemic

I'm an extrovert. I thrive when I'm around people. I love crowds and parties. I prefer a minimum of seven hugs a day and I'm known to have two- and three-hour conversations with friends.

That's why I'm miserable right now, in this era of "social distancing." Telling me to stay away from other human beings is like depriving me of food.

I hate it. But I get it. I know we have to protect others from the spread of the dreaded coronavirus. I'm washing my hands. I'm limiting contact. My travel schedule has been cleared. I know I have to tolerate some cabin fever until the worst kind of fever is no longer a threat.

Just like you, I have to endure this. And I'm looking for the best ways to not only survive but also thrive during this global virus scare. Here are some of the steps I recommend:

Stay fit. Your immune system will be stronger if you are

exercising. If your gym is closed, do a daily routine at home. You can literally fight off disease by staying active. And don't let stress drive you to binge on junk food.

Limit your news intake. You don't have to listen to the news every 10 minutes to get a death toll—or to hear politicians argue about who's to blame for this crisis. So much of our media is spreading stress-inducing hysteria. All this panic being stirred up by the media can actually make people sick. Tune it out.

Stay positive. Joy is a medicine. Laughter releases endorphins into your system and strengthens your immune system. I'm not making light of a pandemic. But you are more prone to get sick if you are living under a pessimistic cloud. Share jokes, watch comedies, keep smiling and rejoice in the Lord. Also, read Paul's letter to the Philippians, which is called "the epistle of joy" because the word "joy" or "rejoice" appears in it 16 times.

Trust the Lord. The world is not ending. This too shall pass. The Bible says the best antidote for worry is prayer. Relax, give God your fears and quote Scriptures that build trust in His promises. Also, don't focus on conspiracy theories or silly rumors of martial law. Even though "corona" means "crown" in Spanish, this virus is not in charge. Jesus is on the throne!

Let God reset you. Whenever our normal routines are disrupted, we get an unexpected opportunity to reevaluate priorities. Even though this virus is a killer from hell, God can use it. Romans 8:28a (NASB) says: "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God." I have already realized during this crisis that I've been too busy. The coronavirus is helping me slow down and breathe. Listen for the Holy Spirit's voice as you spend more time in solitude.

Don't stop church—but do church differently. Right now in most communities, the government has asked people to limit the size of all gatherings. The Centers for Disease Control recommends that all gatherings be limited to 50 people for the next eight weeks.

Obviously this is having a huge impact on churches. Most megachurches in the United States have switched to online services, while many smaller churches are still meeting—either because they aren't worried about contagion or they don't have the capability to broadcast online.

I believe this crisis can actually work to our advantage. What if we used the coronavirus pandemic as an opportunity to divide our churches into small groups? And what if we gathered regularly in those groups to pray for our nation and the world? Isn't it interesting that most churches can't meet for a Sunday service right now, but we are still allowed to meet in small prayer groups? God wants us to gather in clusters so that we can call heaven down to earth in a time of crisis!

(And when small groups meet for prayer, individuals don't have to sit close to each other or hold hands. But fear should not stop healthy people from praying together for an end to this crisis.)

In the book of Acts, after the first ingathering of Pentecost, believers met in homes for closer fellowship, teaching and prayer (see Acts 2:42, 46). This warm environment provided the nurture that new believers needed, so they could grow, and it provided an intimate place where believers could unite in prayer for God's intervention.

Perhaps the Holy Spirit is using this global disaster to change our ineffective methods. Just because your big services are canceled doesn't mean you can't gather groups of 10 people in homes to pray. Let's ask the Holy Spirit to break our old mindsets so we can embrace His fresh strategies. {eoa}

Brazil Has Become One of the World's Spiritual Hot Spots

Brazilians are known for being loud and passionate. That might be a stereotype, but it seems to match a spiritual trend that is rocking South America's largest country. In February, an estimated 140,000 Brazilian young people made some serious noise when they jammed into three stadiums in the cities of São Paulo and Brasilia.

"Brazilians are the happiest people in the world. We party for anything!" says my friend Felipe Amorim, 29, who was born in Brazil but has lived in Florida most of his life. He and his wife attended The Send in São Paulo because they heard that a huge spiritual revival is growing there. "Seeing people worshipping Jesus in Brazil was a huge joy for me," Amorim added.

The Send is a movement designed to mobilize the next generation for global missionary work. So many young people registered for the event at the Morumbi Stadium in São Paulo that a second venue had to be secured. Organizers said 1.7 million people watched The Send on the Portuguese livestream.

At the rally at the National Stadium in the capital city of Brasilia, the nation's president, Jair Bolsonaro, showed up and announced that Brazil belongs to God. Young people cheered when he told them he is a believer in Jesus.

Although Brazil has struggled with socialism, poverty and political scandals for decades, there are noticeable positive trends these days. Churches are growing, and huge numbers of youth are fueling a passionate revival movement that is spilling into the streets. President Bolsonaro, who was

elected in 2018, is a cultural conservative whose policies have triggered a reviving economy as well as a crackdown on crime.

Even though well-known preachers like Daniel Kolenda, Francis Chan, Christine Caine, Todd White, Randy Clark and dozens of Brazilian leaders spoke at the event in São Paulo on Feb. 8, Amorim said the growing revival in Brazil isn't about personalities: "There will not be one person or one ministry leading this revival. It's God leading it with ordinary people."

The Send underscores what mission researchers have noticed about Brazil for a decade. It is the fifth largest nation in the world, already at least 22% evangelical Christian and the base for hundreds of mission organizations. And leaders in Brazil believe it will soon surpass the U.S. as the world's leading missionary-sending nation in the 21st century.

Josh Lindquist, a revivalist from Minnesota, has made many trips to Brazil and preaches often in conferences there. He says The Send Brazil was three times larger than the previous event held in Orlando, Florida, in 2019—and the volume was much louder.

"When the rain started falling, the youth started dancing," he said. "You could literally feel the stadium shaking. When the Brazilians worship, there is not a dry eye in the place. Brazilians worship Jesus stronger than football fans cheer for their teams."

Lindquist, who leads a ministry called Global Revival Harvest, says Brazil's revival has some unique characteristics, including:

Deep, heartfelt worship. "People get saved just from listening to the music," Lindquist says. Popular Brazilian worship artist Ana Paula has led worship for crowds of up to 2 million people.

Street evangelism. One movement known as Ceu Na Terra (Heaven on Earth) is transforming whole neighborhoods. Youth venture into the streets to preach, worship and pray for people, and they even take their message inside nightclubs.

Baptists are fully open to the Spirit. In Brazil, "Bapticostal" is a norm. Baptists who embrace the gifts of the Holy Spirit are known as "renewed Baptists"—and their churches have grown exponentially. One of the most famous, Lagoinha Baptist in Belo Horizonte, has grown beyond 82,000 members and now has branch churches in Brazil, Europe and the U.S.

At the end of The Send Brazil, attendees took off their shoes and raised them to heaven, pledging before God in their bare feet that they will take the gospel to the nations. This, Lindquist said, is the reason Brazil will be a spiritual powerhouse: "The fire of the Holy Spirit was already burning here. God sent The Send to encourage the Brazilians to export that fire. Brazil will be a key nation for global missions. It is one of the greatest global hot spots on earth."

J. Lee Grady was editor of Charisma for 11 years and now serves as contributing editor. He directs The Mordecai Project (), an international ministry that protects women and girls from gender-based violence. His latest book is Set My Heart on Fire (Charisma House).

CHARISMA is the only magazine dedicated to reporting on what the Holy Spirit is doing in the lives of believers around the world. If you are thirsty for more of God's presence and His Holy Spirit, subscribe to CHARISMA and join a family of believers who choose to live life in the Spirit. [CLICK HERE](#) for a special offer.

Don't Live in Isolation—You Need a Loving Church Family

My wife and I have been visiting different churches in the past several months. We are in search of a place to call home. This isn't an easy process for a traveling minister like me. I'm gone many weekends, so I can't commit to certain duties at a local church, and I don't feel as connected as those who are there every week.

But I need a place to belong, where I can hear God's Word, be refreshed in worship and experience the support of a spiritual family. During our recent journey, we've visited all kinds of churches—Baptist and Baptistical, charismatic and evangelical, denominational and non-denominational. We've been in black, white and blended churches; we've attended churches with older congregations as well as a church with lots of excited teens who crowd the altar every week.

What I've seen during our "spiritual tour" of Troup County, Georgia, has encouraged me so much. I've experienced God's family in all of its diversity, with all of its quirks and warts and weaknesses. I'm certainly not looking for a "perfect" church. (And I know if there were such a thing, it wouldn't remain perfect once I joined it.)

What thrills me is that, even though churches aren't perfect, God has placed His special people everywhere. No matter where I go all over the United States, there are faithful congregations providing a witness of Jesus Christ. They are winning new converts, discipling new and seasoned believers, feeding the homeless, running women's shelters, giving out lunches and bookbags at local schools, visiting nursing homes,

evangelizing college campuses, caring for prisoners, providing counseling services and sending teams on foreign mission fields.

Many American churches today have big struggles. We can't meet our budgets, we can't recruit enough volunteers to care for kids, we want to grow but we watch people leave and never come back. Some of our leaders struggle with depression or burnout. And often our witness is tainted by our hypocrisy. Yet God still dwells in the midst of His flawed people, in good times and bad.

I hear a lot of complaining today about church. Some people have even given up on it. People complain about music styles, music volume, sermon length, meeting times or an unpopular decision the pastor made. Or sometimes people just get offended at another church member and storm out. Since the global church began 2,000 years ago, we've been tossed and battered by theological divisions, heresies, immature leadership, strife, scandal, gossip and—maybe the worst problem—spiritual complacency that has quenched the fire of the Holy Spirit.

And yet the church survives. With all of its problems, the global church has never been as big as it is today. The gates of hell have not prevailed against us. Today I'm so thankful that Jesus dwells among His people, and He speaks to us when we gather, whether we meet in a 5,000-seat megachurch, a traditional building with pews, a converted warehouse, a storefront, a movie theater or a home with seating for only a dozen worshippers.

Psalm 84:1-2a (NASB) says, "How lovely are your dwelling places, O Lord of hosts! My soul longed and even yearned for the courts of the Lord." You won't yearn for God's house if you don't first realize how lovely it is. Don't focus on the problems or nitpick about things you want to change. Instead, embrace the people who provide your spiritual support network.

They are a gift from God.

Psalm 122:1 says, "I was glad when they said unto me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'" Are you glad when you go to church? If we're honest, many of us dread Sunday mornings. We have a beef with the pastor. We have unresolved disagreements with a brother. Or we are just angry and frustrated because we can't have our way. No wonder so many of us have pulled away from fellowship.

In this challenging season of coronavirus panic, we are being told to keep our distance from people, stay away from crowds, don't shake hands, avoid travel, use plenty of sanitizer and live in cautious isolation. I'm not saying you shouldn't use wisdom to avoid contagion. But those advisories have given us a convenient reason to stay away from church. We prefer to live in quarantine.

Please examine your heart. Do you love the church? Do you long for His house? Or have you distanced yourself from God's people? With all of its shortcomings, the local church is God's family. I encourage you to rediscover why God created you for community.

How to Pray When a Global Virus Is Spreading

Just when we thought America's political divisions couldn't get more vindictive, now people are angry that Vice President Mike Pence had the audacity to pray for God's help to stop the

deadly coronavirus.

Last week ,a photo surfaced on newsfeeds of Pence and members of his Coronavirus Task Force bowing in prayer in one of their recent meetings. No audio was provided, but media pundits were quick to skewer the leaders for their show of faith—calling it a hypocritical photo op and using it to lambast Pence for his lack of a medical background.

Thomas Chatterton Williams, who writes for *The New York Times*, offered his below-the-belt jabs by insinuating that the leaders were doing nothing to stop the pandemic other than sitting in a room and praying.

Haters are going to hate. And mockers are going to mock God until Judgment Day. Say what you will about people in the White House praying. You can call them hypocrites. You can ridicule them for their conservative morals. But I'm with Mike Pence on this one. I'm going to pray for this virus to stop because I'm not putting my trust in the government to avert this crisis.

I'm not saying we don't take the necessary precautions. You should wash your hands. You should stay home from work if you're sick. Local and state health departments should get the masks ready and put medical professionals on high alert. We should enact travel bans on affected countries. But at this point, the wisest thing we could ever do is ask Almighty God to extend His mercy and stop this virus from becoming a plague.

I've collected a few Scriptures that I'm using when I pray—because the Bible actually has plenty to say about God's willingness to help us when we face the threat of sickness. I encourage you to use these prayers as you pray for your family, your local area and the nation of China—where most of the coronavirus deaths have occurred so far.

You might even want to print out these 10 Bible verses and

post them on your refrigerator or office computer to remind your family, friends and co-workers that you aren't ashamed to ask for divine protection:

Psalms 57:1 (NASB): "Be gracious to me, O God, be gracious to me, for my soul takes refuge in You; and in the shadow of Your wings I will take refuge until destruction passes by."

Psalms 91:5-6, 9-10: "You will not be afraid of the terror by night, or of the arrow that flies by day; of the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or of the destruction that lays waste at noon. For you have made the Lord, my refuge, even the Most High, your dwelling place. No evil will befall you, nor will any plague come near your tent."

Psalms 5:11: "But let all who take refuge in You be glad, let them ever sing for joy; and may You shelter them, that those who love Your name may exult in You."

Psalms 34:4: "I sought the Lord, and He answered me, and delivered me from all my fears."

Exodus 15:26: "And He said, 'If you will give earnest heed to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in His sight, and give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have put on the Egyptians; for I, the Lord, am your healer.'"

Psalms 55:22: "Cast your burden upon the Lord and He will sustain you; He will never allow the righteous to be shaken."

Psalms 56:3: "When I am afraid, I will put my trust in You."

Philippians 4:6-7: "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Psalms 34:17: "The righteous cry, and the Lord hears and

delivers them out of all their troubles.”

Psalm 46:1: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

When the angel of death passed over Egypt, the children of Israel smeared lamb’s blood on their doorposts and trusted the Lord to deliver them from the invisible plague. We too can give God our fears and expect Him to protect us. This scare will soon pass over.