

As Pandemic's Economic Impact Rages, Churches Rise to Meet Radical Needs

The cafeteria is crowded. The lunch line is out the door. But when asked to pay, you realize your pockets are empty.

Your rent is due. The bills, piling up for weeks, lie unpaid on the kitchen counter. You try to decide which is more important: food or heat?

Your church runs on the support and generosity of others. You feel guilty for asking for more consistent tithes when the world seems to be falling apart. But you realize what you have to give isn't enough to sustain your small congregation.

These scenarios and many more have become commonplace as America nears the one-year mark of battling COVID-19.

Even though many congregations are still not able to meet in person due to social distancing restrictions, followers of Jesus across the country are finding creative ways to meet the needs of those affected most by COVID.

The Debt Is Paid

Florida megachurch Idlewild Baptist Church, with campuses in Tampa and Lutz, Florida, has been tutoring and mentoring the public school students in Hillsborough and Pasco counties since before the pandemic hit. In an attempt to remind its community of God's grace, Idlewild provided for the kids who were in debt to the school.

"After talking to the school districts in the two counties where our church is sandwiched between, we found out that, though lunches are being funded this year, the debt that students owed to the schools was very high," director of local

missions Yerusha Bunag says. “We wanted students to know that God loves them; that in God, all debts are paid. So that’s what we did. We paid the debt for juniors and seniors at Hillsborough County and the debt for all students at Pasco County.”

A Place of Comfort and Sound Counsel

Christ’s Church of the Valley in greater Phoenix, Arizona, saw the need for Bible-based counseling in a time when isolation has caused depression, suicide and other mental health issues to skyrocket.

Through its “Press On” campaign, the church partnered with over 4,000 people to raise almost \$2 million. The church launched the effort in December 2019 as a way to highlight mental health problems and offer solutions. As COVID hit the start of the following year, Pastor Tyler Kurbat saw the divine timing of the program and credits the prompting of the Holy Spirit for the church’s role in caring for its community in such a powerful way.

“It was amazing how God sort of set the table for us, led our leadership to know that this is a topic that is important ...,” Kurbat says. “The opportunity was to remind our congregation and also non-believers that you’re seen, you’re not alone and that there’s help, because really there’s a tremendous opportunity to destigmatize these topics and provide some actual hope.”

Due to supporters’ generosity, the church is able to cover 80% of the cost of the first 10 counseling sessions. After that, the church will cover half the cost of the next 10 sessions.

Kurbat reflects on how the church as a whole has often neglected mental health conversations in years past and praises God for the chance to contribute in a mighty way. “We had the opportunity as a church to jump in and fill that gap,” he says.

Practical Community Outreach

After living homeless, virtually unknown by anyone in the congregation, one member of New Directions Church in Indianapolis, Indiana, is one of many grateful recipients of the Lilly Endowment Inc. Precious Williams, mother of 2, lived on the streets of Marion County until the \$17 million grant provided her with access to a monthly food pantry, and leaders of the church rallied around her to help pay for her rent and utilities. New Directions is one of eight African American churches or grassroots organizations that received grant money in January 2021.

Tithes Arising

In addition to their pastoral duties of caring for the wellbeing of their congregations, many pastors were concerned as the pandemic began how economic stresses, including job losses, would affect tithes and other financial gifts to their churches. Mainstream media continues to highlight the rising unemployment rate and other financial losses from COVID-19.

And yet the church has not collapsed. Far from it, Pastor Ennis Fant of Powdersville Baptist Church says. In fact, many churches report an increase in tithing as their congregants spend less on going out and more on charitable giving.

These Christ-followers and others who have stepped up during pandemic as well as the “snowpocalypse” that has ravaged the U.S. in recent days bring to mind Christ’s words in one of His best-known parables: “Truly I say to you, as you have done it for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you have done it for Me” (Matt. 25:40). {eoa}

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