

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.
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