

How Is the Church Gathering During Social Distancing?

Do you remember the Sunday after 9/11?

I was a pastor, and I'll never forget the crowds from that day. People flocked to church. We had to add extra chairs. It was unlike anything I'd ever seen. Fast forward to Saturday, Feb. 1, 2003. The space shuttle Columbia exploded upon reentry, right over Texas. I was a new pastor in Houston and didn't realize how close that tragedy would hit the city that bore the space program. Church was packed. Just like 9/11.

In times of panic, people need to gather. In times of sudden uncertainty, people flock to church. And they *like* being together. Social distancing is necessary right now, but the Scriptures tell us that the very first thing God says is that it's bad is for us to be "left alone" (Gen. 2:18)

So what is a pastor to do when there's a greater desire than ever to hear a message of hope, but the solution seems to be not to gather together?

The search firm I founded over a decade ago has allowed me to serve some of the best and brightest church leaders in the U.S. and now across the planet. This week, we have been getting slammed with questions from clients about what "everyone is doing" about church this Sunday.

Since we work with the majority of the largest churches in the country, I texted some of those pastors to see what their approach to the weekend would be. The responses came in three groups: About a third are choosing to suspend church services. About a third are still carefully monitoring things, and as of this writing, are planning on gathering. Yet another third told me, "We are still figuring this out. Please tell us what you find out!"

A pastor of a very large church in Texas told me, "The Bible teaches us that we should gather together. But it also teaches us that we should honor those in authority over us (the government) and teaches us over and over that we are to do everything we can to help the helpless. Even if we are healthy, even if it seems silly, if suspending meeting means helping solve this, then that's what we will do.

On the other hand, Chris Hodges, senior pastor of Church of The Highlands, which is one of the largest churches in the country, told me, "We are not entertainment. We are a hospital. We are a place of worship. We are the place that people go when nothing else is open. We need to give staff and volunteers the option of staying home if they feel that is what's best. But the church needs to stay open."

So there are a variety of opinions among very smart people. But even among that variety, some common best practices are bubbling up:

1. Giving hugs, shaking hands and the like have been replaced with bumping elbows or tapping feet with each other.
2. Churches that set up with chairs are eliminating some seating and creating space between chairs.
3. Senior adult ministries and programs have been largely suspended so that those at risk are best protected.
4. Online platforms are no longer just an option. They are the new norm, particularly for very large churches. Many have followed the lead of my friend Craig Groeschel who pioneered online church at in Oklahoma.
5. Online or electronic giving has become mandatory. We have seen giving trends change toward this dramatically in the last decade, but there are still a whole lot of churches that rely on the weekly Sunday offering. "Passing the plate" just cannot happen right now. I'm seeing lots of folks who have never considered online giving now giving it a try. There are several good

platforms out there. The largest is Pushpay (to be transparent, we have done searches for them in our nonchurch practice).

Smaller churches actually have the biggest problems. “Normal sized churches” is a term we use at our office for churches that have 100-300 attendees. About half of our search work is with the “normal” sized church, and there are a lot of them. Of the (around) 365,000 Protestant churches in the United States, about 350,000 have fewer than 300 attendees. Most of those churches are too small to build an online campus but too large to gather together during this time of social distancing. One client we highlighted at our staff meeting Friday was a church of 220 just outside Seattle, the epicenter of the outbreak for the United States. But Washington isn’t allowing meetings over 200. Here are some options I see pop up for churches facing this dilemma:

1. Those who don’t have the capacity for building an online worship service are implementing Facebook Live and YouTube as their means of broadcasting a service instead of meeting, or for those who need to stay home.
2. One really cool option that popped up just today is from . They launched a platform, , to help average-sized churches immediately plug in their services to an existing platform.
3. House churches are back. During the persecutions of the first century, the church was forced to meet in homes, often with fewer than 20 people. Those “house churches” networked together to stay in touch, and when possible, gather as one. Ecclesia Church here in Houston is holding regular services but is encouraging anyone at risk to join online, and anyone with children to gather in a house church, with a network of those “churches” being coordinated by church staff.

Meeting in person really is best. I often joke that if virtual meetings were as good as face to face, Jesus would have just

“skyped it in” rather than be born on earth. But given our situation, necessity is creating innovation throughout churches all over the world. The crowds this Sunday may not be big, and maybe they shouldn’t be. But that won’t keep churches from offering hope to hurting world this week.

And if there’s a verse all of my clients are quoting this week, it’s James 4:8: a “Come near to God, and he will come near to you. *Wash your hands, you sinners.*” {eo}

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