

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}