

How to Expand the Reach of the Gospel During COVID-19

Although public health authorities have asked Americans to help “flatten the curve” of the COVID-19 spread, Christians have the opportunity to help others “flatten the fear,” says Dr. Mark Virkler, who founded and directs Communion with God Ministries along with his wife, Patti.

With their hopes pinned on a future COVID vaccine, many people who have been isolated for months and unsure about the future are on edge. A spirit of fear has seemingly shrouded communities across the country, increasing anxiety, frustration and disconnection from others. They have become timid about reaching out to others.

People are struggling with what to believe, who to trust and what—or who—will deliver them from COVID and the fear of contracting the disease. Distrust seeks to destroy bonds between people, whether with a “neighbor” down the street, a person down the aisle in a grocery store or a friend or family member on the other end of a text or video call.

The truth about COVID and other politicized matters seems fluid or elusive in this environment.

“So-called ‘facts’ are hard to come by, as so many have a political agenda,” Virkler says.

Tension reveals the lack of peace many people feel. News channels regularly cover stories of people getting punched or berated in stores for not wearing a mask or maintaining six feet of social distance from other shoppers.

As controversial as mask-wearing has become in the U.S. during this election season, Virkler encourages Christians to be sensitive to others who may feel differently on whether a mask

is effective in preventing the spread of COVID, especially when outdoors.

“Wearing a mask is a way of helping others cope with their fear,” Virkler says, reflecting on how believers’ respectful actions show that they recognize people are hurting during this difficult time.

Believers aiming to show the love of Christ have the opportunity to reach out to their neighbors. Answering the important question “Who is my neighbor?” during the COVID-19 crisis means considering how your neighbor feels in this uncertain time.

Doug Addison, founder and president of InLight Connection in Santa Maria, California, believes it’s important to take a considerate rather than a contrary approach to the volatile issue of social distancing.

“One of the things Jesus said to do is to practice hospitality, and this means to be considerate of one another,” Addison says. “The pandemic has put us all in a strategic place to be the light in darkness. People are struggling with fear and hopelessness. We can reassure them that God has not forgotten them, and this tragic time will pass. I encourage people to be safe and stay in faith by going into public and practicing social distancing.”

Reg Morais, an Australia-based pastor who leads Living Faith Community and who has a prophetic umbrella covering hundreds of thousands of people, concurs with Addison.

“Pray for one another and encourage one another,” Morais says. “Don’t become an island. Be sure to connect with one another, whether it is on the phone, text messaging, emails, Zoom calls or whatever it is. We need to be solution-oriented and help one another wherever we can.”

Speaking Life to Others

Amid these challenges, Christians are seeking and finding ways to follow Jesus' command to "love your neighbor as yourself" (see Mark 12:30-31). Sandra Giet, lead pastor of Mid-City Vineyard Church in Los Angeles and the first solo female lead pastor in the U.S. to plant a church as part of the Association of Related Churches network, feels strongly about being both practical and prayerful at this time.

"We encourage our church members weekly to be praying for their neighbors and to look for practical, tangible ways to reach out and bless and support their neighbors," Giet says. "This is actually an amazing time in history. We have so much to offer in the hope and peace of Christ and our own love to those who are anxious and afraid.

"Words have power—even creative and mindset-changing power, available and transformative through the power of the Holy Spirit," Giet says. "Speaking words of wisdom bring life to one's neighbor."

Morais, who is also an author of multiple books about the nature and work of the Holy Spirit, speaks to the immediate need for compassion care.

"During this season, it is important to only share words of healing and words of comfort," Morais says. "Words of healing and comfort for your neighbor will bring encouragement and remove the fear."

Russ Walden, founder and prophetic leader of Father's Heart Ministry in Branson, Missouri, also speaks to the value of an encouraging word.

"The key to dealing with fear and the pandemic's uncertainties is to move in the opposite spirit," Walden says. "How do we do that? When someone greets you or inquires about your well-being, speak encouragement and something uplifting.

"Taking this approach is not mere positive thinking but to

move in the opposite spirit. Remember, you can't solve the problem on the level of the problem. You can't combat fear without raising the dialogue and your conduct into a higher perspective."

Walden pointed to 1 Timothy 1:7 (NKJV) as relevant for such a time as this: "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind."

"When you encounter fear, respond in love," Walden advises. "Stay attuned to others' feelings and responses."

He urges Christians to respond to fearful people with godly humility. Many feel a sense of helplessness and an inability to control their environment, which show through fear, anger and resentment.

"As believers, we may not have direct control over things, but we serve the one who is in charge," Walden says.

Balancing the spiritual and the physical has become more delicate in the post-COVID age of social distancing. Before venturing out to minister to others with care and empathy, some ministry leaders advise taking steps to strengthen yourself in the Holy Spirit as well as in the physical body.

"Love, joy and peace are fruits of the Spirit, and they all help build a strong immune system, as does speaking in tongues," Virkler says. "We know a strong immune system fights off disease, so do everything you know to do to strengthen your immune system, including plenty of sunshine, exercise, vegetables, vitamin C and vitamin D."

Taking precautions to protect oneself and one's neighbor from COVID-19 is a responsible act of compassion and love. But the good news is we do not have to be stuck in fear. Christians are being led by the Holy Spirit to reach out to their neighbors in new and fitting ways.

For example, members of Mid-City Vineyard Church in Los Angeles have offered to do grocery shopping for people who are most at risk of catching COVID-19. One person was helping a neighbor who had cancer, and when she died, he adopted her dog and gave him a home. A family noticed the overgrown yard of an older widow in their neighborhood and chose to serve her by cleaning her yard.

“Several people in Mid-City Vineyard Church have shared how they have met neighbors during the pandemic who they have never met before,” Giet says.

Feeding Neighbors in Need

God has used Natalie Flores, a member of Giet’s church, to start a food outreach that drew national attention from The New York Times. In the second month of the pandemic, Flores, an urban farmer and educator, sought guidance from the Holy Spirit on what to do to reach out to her neighbors.

“I felt like I was unable to do anything, like I wasn’t exuding light,” Flores says. “I felt powerless. I remember sitting back and just talking to God and saying, ‘God, please use all of my potential. Use my gifts. Help me do what I do best out in the world.’ Even though we weren’t supposed to be out, I knew there was a way to still serve. I just didn’t know what it was yet.”

She continued to seek the Lord about how to do considerate, helpful outreach and shine the light of Christ during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“At the garden where I was working at the time, my co-worker ran into a woman dropping off her compost,” Flores explains. “We had a compost hub site there. She noticed how much food she was bringing by and asked her about it. She told me about it when she got back to the garden. Immediately, it was like ‘Ding.’ I knew that I needed to talk to this woman and find out where she is getting all this food, which I could funnel

through my network of people. And that's exactly what I did."

She believes God dropped this idea into her mind to redistribute the food that was being thrown away from restaurants and grocery stores. She started a "hub site," similar to a food bank, in her neighborhood for people in need.

"The following week I was able to get a van load of good, healthy produce and bring it to the garage," Flores says. "My neighbors helped me package it all up. We made a flyer and let all my neighbors know to save their paper bags. In an hour and a half, we were able to distribute about 60 bags of food to people in need."

Flores responded to the need of her neighbors, trusting the Holy Spirit to help her make it happen.

"The need is so great," she says. "I could not just sit back and watch my neighbors go hungry when I know I am capable of doing something. This is where God told me to go. He said, 'Feed your neighbors.'"

The ability to feed an increasing number of people over time has been nothing short of miraculous in her eyes. God has shown up in ways that point back to New Testament times when Jesus multiplied the boy's loaves and fishes to feed a crowd.

"Every week we've seen multiplying the loaves of bread, multiplying the food amount," Flores says. "I eventually looked at my neighbors and said, 'I think we will need a large hub site. We will need refrigeration. A lot of what we're getting is perishable. It needs to go to families in need.' That's when I put a call out to my network and friends and family and said, 'Hey, who has a restaurant? Who has refrigeration? Who can help us and support us to do this hub site?'"

Her former boss stepped up to help. He had just laid off 65

employees due to the economic impact of the COVID pandemic. The first hub site event Flores did was just for his employees. Her food distribution events have accelerated regularly since April.

"I was appalled by how many people were in need," she says. "People were telling us their stories, 'I just got laid off. I have no idea how I am going to feed my family. I am on my last \$100.' To me, that is a surreal feeling when you see people in your community say, 'I need help. I need food. I can't feed my family.'"

Not only did Flores lean on her neighbors to get the word out and help feed other neighbors, but she also leaned on God and learned an important lesson.

"It just goes to show that when God is telling you to do something, you really don't hesitate," she says. "You just go and do it.

"In some ways, I didn't know what I was doing. I had never made a flyer [to promote the food hub site]. But I have always worked with food, so it made perfect sense that God was using me in this way."

Flores considers food to be a "great bridge" to bring people together and shine the light of Christ. During a time of shutdowns and stay-at-home orders creating a sudden sense of isolation and disconnectedness, she was willing to listen to God and obey His direction.

Flores also believes God has been testing her to take steps to put her faith in action in her community. She says she has grown spiritually through the experience and has seen God's faithfulness at every turn. She is quick to give God credit and to tell her neighbors that the Lord is the driver of the food outreach.

"It goes to show that there is a lot of important work that

needs to be done, and it doesn't have to be so big and so huge," Flores says. "It's actually right at our fingertips if we are willing to be humble, do the work, let God work through us, let God work through our networks, work through our gifts and just be of service. Let God be the light and the love. Let that be the outpouring of the goodness that needs to be brought onto this earth, especially right now."

This food distribution operation, now called "Nourish LA," started in her garage with Flores and friends packing bags with groceries that would have rotted in the trash every day from every restaurant and every major grocery store. This supply now feeds more than 1,000 people every time it's distributed.

Even though in-person church services have been stopped or restricted for months during the pandemic, the Good News of God's sacrificial love, relentless caring and faithfulness through His children has still been reaching people in need.

To read more about compassionate efforts of various kinds, go to [. {eo}](#)

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