

How You Can Convert Evangelistic Challenge Into Life-Changing Opportunity

I penned the following words into my journal in Good Friday, 2020:

Right now, all things are being made new. And it's painful.

Suffering is a sober teacher to remind us that we are not all powerful.

Uncertainty reminds us that we are NOT all knowing.

Confinement reminds us that we are certainly NOT omnipresent.

The world is being humbled.

The church is being humbled.

I am being humbled.

The last year has been a journey. Everyone has been touched by the impact of COVID-19, the rising awareness of racial disparity, the political polarization of our country and for Christ followers, a new reality of what it means to be the church and be a part of the church.

As churches shut their doors across the country, a verse became the rally cry for our ministry:

“So be careful how you live. Don’t live like fools, but like those who are wise. Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days. Don’t act thoughtlessly but understand what the Lord wants you to do” (Eph. 5:15-17, NLT).

Making the most of every opportunity was a challenge that we

were ready to take on. However, it was bookmarked by the guardrails: Be careful how you live, and understand what the Lord wants you to do. For us at Alpha, it was clear that what the Lord wanted us to do was help equip and serve the church to transition to an online, digital reality.

For decades we had only run Alpha in person and trained thousands of churches on how to effectively connect with people who wouldn't call themselves Christians. Now, with the constraints that were thrust upon us all, it was a moment to sink or swim. We chose to swim, and what we found out was that Alpha was just as effective digitally as it was in person. Sure, the experience was a bit different, but the feedback we were receiving was really encouraging.

People who would never have been able to come to Alpha in person began attending digital Alphas throughout our country. Like the single mom with two kids and a full-time job. Or the man with multiple sclerosis who can't make a long-distance commute and refers to Alpha Online as "Accessible Alpha." Or the cancer patient whose immune system is too compromised for them to be in large gatherings of people—cancer patients like Billy.

Billy was given a terminal cancer diagnosis three years ago. He came to Jesus through Alpha and loved volunteering with Alpha, but his diagnosis made it difficult for him to get around and participate anymore.

Then in April of last year, a friend asked Billy to lead an Alpha Online course, and Billy said yes. Billy shared, "My purpose in life, while I still have it, is to tell everyone I know about Jesus. He's my reason for living. Thanks to Alpha Online, I've been able to fulfill this mission. I've had this opportunity to invite my friends and share my story of hope."

As churches were faced with limitations and challenges of 2020, many responded with a valiant heart, ready to make the

most of the opportunity.

I had the opportunity to see three different churches in our community come together to pull off their online service. One church was particularly adept at all things digital. The other two churches were comprised mostly of older members, but who were all active in their church and community, serving immigrants and refugees through World Relief.

Their blended online digital service was able to honor people from all three unique congregations, including an older woman who played her traditional hymn on the piano, a younger man who led a song with a guitar, short sermons from all three ministers, and interviews and stories that told of what God was up to in each of the churches.

It was an incredible demonstration of unity that honored each church in their own life stage. It was also a great act of friendship for the more digitally adept church to eschew a competitive spirit and invite their closest church neighbors to worship together when they may not have been able to produce a service digitally.

Every challenge we face provides an opportunity for those willing to be careful and understand what the Lord would want us to do.

As the digital church revolution continues to roll out, we pray that our innovation will not stop with the digital platform of our worship services, but will also help shape the way that we love and include our neighbors. Even before the pandemic, many people were simply unable to make their way to in-person services. Now, through the innovation of a few, we are able to see a new way forward that will provide hope and purpose for many.

Platforms like Zoom have provided opportunities for Alpha and churches that allow for small group breakout rooms, unique translation channels and even closed captions. Other platforms

are continuing to innovate as well, and most provide easy access for people to join securely, invite others and have excellent, fun conversations. Not only have these online platforms transformed our work and school environments, but our small group and outreach environments as well.

In the last year alone, we have been able to train thousands of churches all over the world (over Zoom, from the comfort of our own homes) in how to run Alpha. One call just last week had over 30 countries represented with 8 different unique translations happening at the same time.

Necessity, as they say, is the mother of invention. So, what does the church need to do?

“Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days. Don’t act thoughtlessly, but understand what the Lord wants you to do” (Eph. 5:16-17).

As we reach out, our posture needs to be one that reflects an awareness for our time. People are hungry for connection and purpose, but they aren’t always hungry for our delivery methods.

A recent study from Barna suggests that 62% of non-Christians and lapsed Christians say that the top quality they would look for in someone to talk about faith would be that they listen without judgment. The next best quality? They don’t force people to draw a conclusion. Yet only 36% report having a Christian friend who demonstrates those qualities.

Do you see the opportunity? We have an opportunity to be churches willing to listen and not force people to a conclusion. If we will be willing to act thoughtfully with how we share our faith, maybe even change our approaches to evangelism, if no longer effective, we may find ourselves right in the middle of an incredible time of growth and revitalization. {eoa}

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