

Doing Ministry When You Can't Do Church

In light of the "swine flu" which is in the news as I write this, not to mention the decades old concern about a long overdue pandemic racing around the globe, I think it's important to at least ask the question "How will we do ministry if/when we can't gather for church services for a short or extended period of time?"

What is your gut reaction answer? How long would it take you to implement your ideas?

Would your church survive a one month, one quarter, one year shutdown?

Would ministry among and through your congregation continue, grow, or fade away?

There are certainly structural preparations we can make that would aid ministry right now and prepare us for such a scenario: Anything that decentralizes ministry, equips individuals to use their gifts, and reduces a local church's debt and essential operating expenses fits the bill. In addition, there are some obvious and not so obvious steps that can be taken online. For some churches, this prior preparation will mean the difference between institutional survival and death; for others it will be the difference between survival and a growing fruitful ministry.

Here are some suggested preparations to make:

I. Establish an opt-in email list that includes every person in the congregation.

Crisis or not, this needs to happen **now**. And I'm willing to bet you don't have such a list.

Sure, you've got a church database, and your receptionist has a lot of the email addresses in her Outlook address book, but how many are opted in? More importantly, how many can you prove are opted in?

Canada finally has an anti-spam law coming down the pipes. Reports are that it will be similar to the US laws which provide for severe penalties to individuals and organizations who engage in mass unsolicited emailing.

For this reason alone it is time to move to a proper online email system that allows people to subscribe and unsubscribe at will. It should also have a double opt-in requirement. This means that a person has to first sign up and then click a link in a confirmation email before being added to a list. Once they've done this, even if they report you as a spammer, you are safe. (Most churches will not realize how important this is until there is a high profile case of a Christian ministry charged with spamming.)

Apart from the spam issue, this opt-in email list can become an effective means of communication in a crisis. You can use it to provide ministry updates, distribute links to webpages and web events, and of course solicit ministry where and when it is needed around the community.

(See the "Links" page on ChurchNetMarketing.com for a recommended email service provider.)

II. Establish an Interactive Online Communications Base

There are numerous ways of doing this: blogs, forums, and social networks such as Facebook. The idea is that people can communicate en masse, not merely one on one.

Apart from a crisis, this can help build community with the smattering of people who utilize it; in a crisis such a system will become essential. In fact, a well run Facebook page could reduce the need for mass email, though it is probably wise to do both in order to maintain contact with as many as possible. Add the Twitter application to the mix and voila, instant mass communication to those who choose to plug in.

III. Create a Blueprint of What Ministry Will Look Like Without Large Celebration Gatherings

Here are some questions to answer in building this blueprint:

- Will we try to replace the celebration gatherings in some way or simply ramp up our small groups, or ??
- What happens to/how will we utilize church staff whose primary focus is the large gatherings?
- What are the financial implications of such a crisis for the church?
- What obvious ministry opportunities will such a crisis create?
- Are there things we can do differently right now that will both advance our current ministry vision and prepare us for a major health, or other type of crisis?
- How would we handle a large number of deaths in the congregation?
- For Denominational Leaders: How will you resource your churches in such a crisis? And, how will you function with near zero cash flow from the constituent churches to the umbrella organization?
- How will people be able to give (and *will they give*) without an offering plate/bag?!?

(Note: The easiest solution to offsite giving is a PayPal account. This will allow people to give via credit cards or directly from their bank accounts. It might be worth looking into even without a crisis since so many people already use PayPal.)

IV. Experiment with Online Tools and Identify People in the Community Who Will Help You Quickly Get Functional When Necessary

Pastors, *at least take a look at* blogs, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. Take a teleclass or webinar, sign up for an email newsletter, participate in a forum. Think about how these could be harnessed for ministry with or without a crisis.

It's ironic how many boomers are still debating whether it's possible to have "true community" online; meanwhile, our children are out there texting and FaceBooking their way into a level of connectedness few of us have ever experienced. No, it's not perfect, but neither was Corinth or any church or small group I've been a part of. Relationships *are* being formed and cultivated online, community *is* happening. Get a grip on it, participate in it in some measure, or get left behind.

V. For Keeners Only: Do a Trial Run of Church Life With No Large Gatherings

Here's what it might look like:

- Live webstreaming of the worship leader and pastor leading a service. This would also be recorded and made available for download off the church website, or simply re-played at the scheduled service times. Or, consider doing daily online devotionals instead of the one-shot service.
- During the "service" explain to people how they can give online, at the bank or at the church through the week. Point them to a webpage with further announcements. Reiterate how the mission of the church is unchanged by the crisis, even though the strategy may be. Solicit ideas on how to best make disciples in the new context.
- Plan an online-only youth event. This could be a meeting in a virtual world, or a live webinar with chat, games like an online scavenger hunt or group webpage building, etc.
- Link your small groups up online for a larger gathering. New HDTV's finally allow a computer to be hooked up to TV with proper resolution, and can serve as a larger monitor for the small groups, with webcams providing a view of one another if desired.
- Do a teleclass prayer meeting, where people phone in to a common number and have a conference call style prayer meeting.

- Children's ministry teams could do a web based lesson and activity, including music, teaching, and crafts using household items.

Your ministry team will probably be able to come up with many more and much better ideas than these if they are asked!

Conclusion:

Please don't interpret these ideas as opportunistic hype or paranoia; the purpose of this paper is simply to get you to ask the question "How will we do ministry if/when we can't gather for church services for a short or extended period of time?"

A little thought and preparation in answer to that question will streamline the adjustments you will need to make if/when there is a large scale or localized crisis that curtails weekly worship services. Please don't hesitate to contact me with any questions or feedback.

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