

From risk management to risk-taking

March 11, 2021

On this one-year anniversary of the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems appropriate to take stock and assess the American church.

For many of us, the year has been the challenge of a lifetime in ministry leadership. The obstacles and demands of dealing with the pandemic have stretched us in ways we never thought possible.

We have done things we thought were at best optional, like technology, and we have done without things we thought were indispensable, like hospital visits.

We have realized how much of what we did was meaningless repetition, like endless meetings, and we've come to appreciate how much we took for granted the most basic parts of congregational life, like human touch.

We've seen people step up and flourish in hard times, and we've seen hard times wipe out people we thought were redwoods.

Risk management

One phrase continues to hang over many of the churches and ministers I engage with—risk management.

Opening and closing buildings, limiting or eliminating in-person events, monitoring our health and our interactions have all led us to become keenly aware of our risk management obligations.

Early in the pandemic, we wondered about legal liability if someone were to

become infected while participating in events at our church. So, we severely cut back on those events. We sterilize. We wash our hands. We've become adamant and diligent about infecting others. So, we wear masks and keep our distance from one another.

Risk management has become a prioritized way of life for us. That's what a pandemic does to us; it heightens our awareness of our vulnerability and forces us to grow more risk averse in the process.

All of that is fine with regard to the virus and its transmission, but there is another reality at play for many churches. Our risk management awareness and wariness may well bleed over into our corporate spiritual life and cause us to become so risk-averse that we miss the opportunity before us.

Risk-taking

I believe we are about to enter a season of life in the American church that cries out for churches to embrace risk-taking.

The pandemic has launched a potentially creative disruption of the norm we desperately need if we are to enter the future with a creative and innovative mindset.

This is a moment we may not see again for many years. The rupture of our former model of doing church has opened doors for risk-taking wise leaders will recognize.

Rather than revert back to "normal" when restrictions are lifted, thoughtful leaders will recognize this is our chance to reverse the ominous trends of the last 20 years.

The data is overwhelming. Nearly every denominational body in America shares a [trend line](#) that predicts imminent threat to the long-term viability of many local congregations.

If you're brave, pull together the data for your own church over the last 20 years, and you probably will find a similar reality. We are entering a decade many predict will see a significant percentage of local [churches go out of existence](#).

If there ever was a time to be open to risk-taking, this is it.

What risk-taking looks like

What does risk-taking actually look like for a church?

I think it means at least five things:

1. We acknowledge we are in the midst of a crisis larger than we have realized. For many of us, a sense of urgency that has been lacking needs to be fed and funneled into some hard conversations.
2. We spend time reconnecting with our reason for being and reconnecting with those priorities. We go back to the book of Acts and devour those stories and lessons.
3. We confess that much of what we do and how we do it simply is preference and not gospel priority. We humble ourselves and acknowledge we've drifted far from the focused church Jesus envisioned.
4. We put aside personal comfort and preference and embrace the idea of being part of a gospel movement rather than a member of a church club.
5. We personally pledge to engage in and participate in some form of risk-taking that makes us uncomfortable, so our church may not only survive but also thrive. We commit to criticize less and pitch in more.

What all of this will look like at your church will vary greatly from other churches. However, it inevitably will involve something that challenges you

and makes you uncomfortable and pushes you out of your comfort zone.

It will mean you don't simply insist your church "go back to the way it was," because that way is a shortcut to irrelevance for many of us. Instead, we will discern our way forward by clinging to our valued principles while embracing sanctified imaginations that cause us to be risk-takers, even while everything screams to be risk managers.

Like the early church, we may find our crisis moment actually is the catalyst for more profound meaning and purpose than we knew possible.

God bless you in that risky endeavor.

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