

Commentary: Confident God prepared us for a time like this

April 20, 2020

The Journey Church in New York City began 2020 on a high note. We were preparing for a big year of new locations in the city, exciting new people on staff and overall excitement about continuing to minister to New York City.

We were aware of what was going on in the world but optimistic about what was happening in our church. We were meeting in two schools, one movie theater and our midtown office every Sunday. When the coronavirus came to the United States and New York, we remained aware of it, but everything remained business as usual ... until the week between March 15 and 22.

The week things changed

Between March 15 and 22, we went from being able to meet in person, to not being able to meet in more than groups of 10, to being told all nonessential workers have to stay home.

On March 22, we began our first Sunday of fully online services. As a staff, we were assigned very different roles than we were accustomed. Suddenly, our Sundays went from six services across four locations to seven online services every two hours. The staff began hosting chats online during services, serving as tech support or performing data entry. Since that Sunday, we have continued to have services online, and during the week, we work from our apartments throughout the city.

Meetings have become all video-based, and our office extensions ring on our cell phones. We have moved all of our small groups online with leaders

leading through Skype, BlueJeans, Zoom or a conference call, and we have instituted weekly prayer calls for our members to send in prayer requests and to join us in prayer.

One of the questions I have been asking myself is, “How do we still do ministry in New York when we can’t meet in person?”

We now email our members and attenders more regularly, send more mailings, reach out personally on a staff level and chat with people attending our services through a chat feature on our livestream.

As a church, we are working to adjust to the restrictions put in place for the city. We are more reliant than before on our members inviting people to our services.

Seeking the familiar

With many churches livestreaming services, people are moving to what is familiar in a time when nothing is certain. My Sundays now consist of hosting the first two services of The Journey and then flipping over to a livestream of First Baptist Church in Muleshoe to watch my dad preach since I also crave the familiar.

When we first made the move to online services and working from home, I thought it would last maybe a month. It was exciting to see our church transition—in a mostly seamless fashion—to online services.

As we enter month two of online services, my perspective has changed. I love interacting with the members and attenders of the church through the live chat during the services I host, but I miss seeing their faces and wrapping people in a hug.

The online services and the live chat do provide a way for our church to meet together as a whole instead of in the individual locations, which

provides a way to be one church. Most of the chat consists of people saying, “Hi,” to each other, typing in lines from the worship music and message, and helping people who are having trouble with the livestream or downloading the message notes. While it creates a sense of community for our attendees, it is hard for me when I see a name pop up on the chat and picture that person serving in person, see them in their “usual seat” or see their face as they walked into service a few weeks ago.

Longing for Sundays as they were

I also miss the fast pace of my Sundays. For the past year, I have helped to run one of our four locations. It was my job to recruit volunteers, help set up the location and be the go-to person when anyone needed anything on Sunday morning. That all came to a screeching halt in mid-March as we transitioned to online services.

My Sundays now have become a regular working day, sitting down at my computer, logging into our services, chatting with people in the live chat and doing data entry. Since this is a part of my Monday through Friday routine, it has become harder to distinguish a Sunday from any other day of the week.

I miss the community of people I see from the back of a service. I miss the volunteers welcoming people as they walk in the door. I miss volunteers going out with invite cards to invite people to church.

Most of all, I miss just doing ministry in the city. When I first joined the staff of The Journey almost two years ago, I never could have imagined services would be completely online, not only for us, but for churches across the country.

When I first started attending The Journey, I was a Texas transplant looking for a church home. I moved from being an attendee to a member of our

worship arts team. As I rose in leadership, I was asked to join the staff, and I haven't looked back.

Hoping through the change

The staff I joined is very different from the staff today. The New York I moved to and started doing ministry in is very different from the New York I now experience. The familiar sounds of restaurants and Broadway shows have been replaced by sirens. I miss the 13-hour Sundays filled with worship services, the happy sounds of our welcome team and friends.

I am hopeful for the return to normalcy, and I am not sure when or what that will be, but I know God has prepared us for a moment such as this.

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