

Voices: Pastoring from self-quarantine in the pandemic

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“I’d rather be at home when the world starts to end.”

That’s what I quipped to Joy, my wife, as we anxiously watched coronavirus news coverage from our hotel room in Jerusalem.

Days earlier, a tour group from our church had embarked on a Holy Land tour. I had kept an eye on the developing COVID-19 crisis as the trip date neared, but in conversing with our travel company and in looking at the news, I wasn’t overly worried. At the time we left there were zero cases in Harris County and just a handful in Toronto—our connecting airport—and Israel.

We were going to be fine, I thought at the time.

Now in Israel, nagging doubts were creeping into the back of my mind.

Doubts and questions

What if one of my church members contracted the virus while we were traveling? Would everyone else in the group be infected? Would we be allowed to travel back? Were airports even scanning for that sort of thing? If so, did I need to stay behind with them? What were my duties and obligations as a pastor in that sort of situation?

Those, of course, were separate thoughts from my family. Our youngest son was with a group from our church on a mission trip to Kenya. I wondered both if they had been—or would be—exposed to the virus, and I wondered if they would be able to return home safely.

Our oldest son was home from college on spring break, dog sitting and house sitting for the rest of our family while the rest of us were dispersed around the globe. His university had just announced his courses would be transferred online, which meant he would be living at home the rest of the semester—leading to an entirely different train of worry.

Perhaps most stressful were the time-sensitive needs of our community. How would this virus affect our congregation, and, more importantly, how would this affect our city? Houston is home to the largest medical center in the world, and I wondered how many of our city's great minds would be put in harm's way due to this contagion.

Certainly, there was much to consider.

Things start happening

While in Israel, the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo discovered at least one individual who tested positive for COVID-19 had attended. In an unprecedented move, they closed down mid-day for the remainder of the planned three-week run. The HLSR is an enormous event, easily the largest event in the city each year, as thousands descend upon the midway, the nightly concerts and the rodeo.

When the HLSR abruptly closed its doors, the city sat up and noticed. It was the first local domino to fall.

Immediately, Lakewood Church—the megachurch pastored by Joel Osteen—announced they would be suspending in-person worship services.

And the dominos started to fall more quickly.

After a brief moment of conferring with two of our pastors, I made the call to follow suit and suspend in-person worship services, as well. My thought process was simple: We have a large contingent of senior adults in our

congregation, and I didn't want to endanger anyone unnecessarily.

While I was in Israel, the team began pivoting towards online worship. I scrambled to find a suitable place to record a sermon and attempted to deliver it with passion into my phone's camera. Uploading a large video file to the web proved to be more difficult than I anticipated, but eventually, the sermon was transmitted back to Houston.

While the remainder of our trip was fun, informative and light-hearted, each night became a time to check in with family around the world and to watch the news.

Travel in a pandemic

The nation of Israel literally was closing down a bit more each day we were in country. First, Israel announced no more incoming flights, including from the United States. Then, they announced a limit on the size of groups that could gather. Then, they started closing businesses, restaurants and cafés.

We made it back to North America the day before Air Canada stopped flying out of Tel Aviv. All of us did make it back to Houston safely, but one couple was detained in Toronto overnight because the husband had a pronounced cough. He tested negative for COVID-19 and was allowed to fly back the following day.

You know those movie scenes where the hero slides under the door just before it slams shut?

It felt like we were living that scene.

Upon return, it was a simultaneous whirlwind of activity and passivity. Because of international travel, we were to self-quarantine for 14 days—the potential incubation period of the virus. As I write, I am on Day 13 and am

symptom-free; thanks be to God.

Further thanks: None of our international travelers to Kenya or Israel—53 in total—appear to have contracted COVID-19 while passing through international airports and interacting with tour groups from every corner of the world.

Leading from quarantine

Yet even while I was in quarantine, it was an almost nonstop movement of work. Immediately we started virtual meetings as a team, and the mountain of challenges seemed to grow by the minute, as the CDC's guidelines were continually shifting.

Would the offices remain open? We decided “yes” for the time being, but all team members who traveled internationally would need to be quarantined in order to protect our senior adults. Would we continue to allow groups and studies to meet? Again, we decided “yes,” as that was within the CDC guidelines.

We scrambled to start local ministry as best we could. We encouraged church members to locate and donate N95 masks. We started purchasing large batches of food from local restaurants and having it delivered to local businesses deemed “essential” who were still working. We created a form for people to volunteer to run errands for those who needed help. We scrambled to do work within the guidelines.

And then the guidelines changed.

And then Harris County asked us to stay home.

We kept working and ministering, but we were faced with a new question: How do you pastor and shepherd when you aren't allowed to see one another ... potentially for months?

Pastoring from quarantine

I never realized how much pastoral care and shepherding was a “by the way” activity. As we gather together corporately—be it for worship or study, a meal or an event—I was able to look people in the eyes, to put my hand on their shoulder, to offer an encouraging word, to pray, to give counsel, to connect them to a team member or a ministry who was best-suited to help them with their particular struggle or challenge.

Just as importantly, in those “by the way” gatherings, you hear about others who were not able to gather. You hear a church member has gotten ill, has lost a loved one, has lost a job, has gone into depression. You hear some are thinking of leaving the church, others need encouragement, others are adopting or have sick kids.

You depend on the people to help keep up with the people.

The shepherd, it turns out, depends a great deal on the sheep.

Shepherding scattered sheep

So, what do you do when you cannot depend on the gathering? You must become a proactive shepherd.

We divided our congregation into a number of groups and decided on intentional contacts. We started calling families with kids and families with students. We reached out to senior adults.

Our group leaders reached out to their groups. Phone, email, text or Zoom—we had no preference. But, intuitively, we believed we would thrive as a congregation only if we decided to be family, to be brothers and sisters.

Pastoring in such a way is simultaneously beautiful and frustrating, energizing and depressing. The people are mobilized in a healthy and good way. Yet, as needs are discovered, we cannot offer the hug and the incarnational presence we know we need.

As we made calls, we uncovered multiple job losses and layoffs. We heard of those hurting. We found out needs. We were able to encourage, but we were not able to be with one another.

A bright spot among the pandemic has been our nation's reawakening to the spiritual reality of the gospel. Thousands are watching livestreams of Sunday services—so many that online platforms are crashing in these early days of coronavirus.

A friend sent me a picture of the Bible aisle from a store in St. Louis. It was so picked over, I initially thought it was the toilet paper aisle. But, no, people were scrambling for the Scripture. Intuitively, they knew to look to God's word for answers.

But it is no substitute for physically gathering, for seeing one another in person.

Seeing ourselves anew

In the end, I think that has been the lesson of the pandemic: Even though we have convinced ourselves we love the digital world, we do not. We like the digital world as a supplement, but not as a primary way of living.

We are humans, after all. We are embodied. This is how God made us, and this is the form his Son took. He walked among us, not as a glowing screen, but as a man with flesh and blood, with hunger and emotions.

We have learned God has made us for incarnation, as well. He has made us to be together, for all of life.

I anticipate none of us ever again will take for granted gathering together—and not simply for worship. Every meal with friends and family will feel special after the pandemic. Every trip to the theater will have a reminder of the time we were not able to laugh and cry in the same room.

Worship and ministry and family are not replicated, no matter how good our teleconferences, no matter how good our prayer calls.

The Word became flesh and walked among us.

I long for the day we get to minister in the flesh again.

Until then, let us remain diligent, looking after our neighbors, community and one another as best we can, in the Spirit of the One who took on flesh.

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