

3 Big Shifts in Post COVID-19 Ministry

A crisis changes you. The extent of the change may vary, but a crisis will leave its mark. A loved one's death, a car accident, cancer, a miscarriage, losing a job, an epic public failure—all will change you, for better or worse. A crisis changes communities and nations as well. Wars, economic depressions, terrorist attacks, and now the global COVID-19 pandemic all usher in a period of rapid change.

COVID-19 is a significant crisis that is a disruption to your ministry. It is not a mere interruption. Your leadership in the next few months will go a long way in determining if your ministry dies, survives, or thrives. A crisis illuminates your strengths and weaknesses, and a wise leader would view it as an opportunity to assess where you are and plan for where you need to be.

2 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT A CRISIS

#1 Crisis is a Revealer

It always amazes me that two different people can respond to the same crisis in two very different ways. I'm from the American Midwest, where tornado warnings are not uncommon. When the sirens wail, some people come out of their homes and look to the sky in curiosity. Others retreat to their basement or storm shelter in fear. Same sirens, two different reactions. I've driven past the scene of more than one minor traffic accident where one party seems calm, cool, and collected. The other is red-faced and yelling at anyone who will listen. Same accident, two different reactions.

How we react in a crisis often reveals our normal emotional state. You are likely able to hide or cope with strong emotions in everyday life, but they bubble to the surface for all to see during a crisis. You could probably write a theological treatise on what the crisis of Jesus's arrest revealed about the disciples as they ran and hid!

A crisis reveals a lot about your ministry. It may show that you are a decade or more behind the times with digital technology. Your lag was always there, but this crisis amplified it. Maybe it reveals that your ministry was operating with no financial margin. The restrictions against gathering as a congregation in one place may demonstrate that personal connections and relationships were either a strength or weakness in your church. By its very nature, a significant crisis breaks down the facade. It exposes who you really are—and you may not like what you see.



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#2 Crisis is an Accelerator

A crisis tends to serve as a reality amplifier. It reveals what reality is—and puts it on steroids.

We all have that one person in our social media feeds that just can't seem to control their thoughts and negative comments. I'll call her Karen :) Odds are that Karen has been louder than usual during the COVID-19 crisis! If you struggled with anxiety before COVID-19, it's likely a larger struggle for you now. If a business owner had difficulties with paying their employees before, that struggle is much greater now.

The same is true in ministry. The trends that were happening pre COVID-19 are still happening, but faster and more apparent than before. A crisis doesn't create a trend—it accelerates it. COVID-19 didn't create the momentum or lack of momentum that your ministry was experiencing the last few years. It has spotlighted what was already there. Because crisis is both a revealer and an accelerator, it will reveal and amplify the strengths and weaknesses of your ministry that were already present.

In this context, here are three shifts that are occurring and will continue to happen in the immediate future of ministry.

3 BIG MINISTRY SHIFTS

#1 From Analog to Digital

Undoubtedly, this shift has been forced on you in the last few months. This is one that you cannot fight if you want your ministry to operate in the future. This shift is here to stay. How you deal with this reality will say a lot about where your ministry is headed.

Are you the newspaper publisher in 1999 who thought that people would come back to reading print publications after the digital fad ran its course? Or are you the newspaper publisher who saw their company as a content provider no matter the medium and invested in the digital realm? Research revealed that before the crisis, the average person viewed your online presence seven times before stepping foot on your campus. What will that statistic be after the crisis?

Digital is much more than uploading a video of your Sunday worship service. It is now the primary means that you have at your disposal to communicate with those who are not yet part of your church. Your resources and staffing should reflect that fact.



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#2 From Attendance to Engagement

One of the failed strategies of the Church Growth Movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s was the idea that churches should offer a lot of affinity-based programs. Sewing clubs. Fishing clubs. Book clubs. Clubs for people who liked clubs. The more programs, the better! Many ministries still operate out of this playbook. The more things we offer, the better. The more people are busy doing church activities, the better.

The way to measure success in this model is attendance. More people than last year participating? Success! More butts in the seats on Sunday? Success! But as it turns out, busyness wasn't the best ministry strategy. Participation doesn't effectively produce disciples. So what does?

Engagement. It's that simple. For the past decade, smart churches have been simplifying their ministry to increase their engagement. They have been eliminating excess programming that might confuse or diffuse their mission. They are clear about their discipleship process and are always encouraging people to take a next step. They measure their ministry growth/success with one metric—the number of people who are taking steps to grow. How many worshippers have committed to serving twice a month? How many members are actively participating in a small group? How many first-time givers have committed?

The shift to engagement requires that you define steps for people to take to develop their relationship with Jesus and then track engagement in those steps. Is attendance part of engagement? Sure. Showing up counts. But it only counts if you are showing up for something that matters. Post COVID-19, people will have even less interest or tolerance for programs that don't matter. People are busy and stressed. The current crisis will accelerate this reality.

#3 From Teacher to Equipper

Most churches operate their ministry from the “Come—Sit—Get” model. That is, attend church, sit passively, and get theological information. Learning a Biblical story or some kind of ecclesiastical truth is the goal of most Sunday messages. Many growing churches have been providing more practical applications for the last two decades, and the debate between preaching/teaching for head knowledge versus application is a salient one. The reality of our modern world has, I believe, settled this matter in favor of practical teaching.

Here is what the last decade of ministry has taught us: People don't need you or your church for head knowledge. They have Google and YouTube. We no longer live in an illiterate society where the pastor read the Bible and had to tell the people what it said. Modern technology has enabled us to carry a Bible around on our phone!



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Here is what people do need now more than ever: wisdom on how to apply the Gospel and Biblical teachings in their lives. People don't struggle with a lack of information. We struggle with parenting our kids. We struggle with marriage and dating. We struggle with money, with anxiety, and from having more knowledge than we can process! To be frank, we struggle with churches that don't seem to understand that this is what we struggle with!

Churches need to equip people with the resources, tools, and relationships they need to engage in practices that will grow their faith. This is a need that the COVID-19 crisis will amplify. As a result of this crisis, people will have more needs—relational, practical, and spiritual. Your church can help them meet those needs if you can recognize what the needs are and plan an effective response to them. Everyone needs Christian people in their lives to guide them. What better place to find Christian people than the church!

If your ministry is based on the one-way communication of head knowledge, you will struggle to meet people where they are, and you'll never be able to help them get where they want to be.

You may see these shifts already happening in your ministry. You may think that these shifts are not real and won't happen in your ministry. As in all things, time and our collective experience will tell if these shifts become a reality or are merely passing trends. The church has been around for over 2000 years. It has survived and thrived in many circumstances, and today's crisis is either a disruptor of the status quo or an opportunity for growth—you decide which it is going to be for your ministry.

Based on our historical record, here are three truths I am certain of:

The mission of the church should never change.

Our ministry strategy should probably change with each new generation.

The way we do church has already been changed forever.



You have to let go
of normal,
because normal
isn't normal anymore.

- Bryan Blackford