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Moving to the deep end

By Tim Patterson

PLYMOUTH, MI – As a six-year-old boy there are few things as important as being able to swim in the county pool during the blistering hot summer months of West Texas. Fortunately, we lived in a wealthy county because of the tax revenue from the oil fields, but the vast majority of the people were common laborers who subsisted on limited incomes. The city fathers made sure that this little community had many of the advantages of much larger towns and cities.

Because we were situated in one of the driest and most desolate desert regions of our country, the leaders in our town provided one of the finest parks in the state in order to give us a retreat from the unbearable heat. There were lush tall trees surrounded by acres of thick green grass. Tennis courts, ball fields, picnic tables and playground equipment covered the massive acreage, but the centerpiece of the park was its Olympic-sized pool. It was a cool, clear oasis in the middle of the desert.

Every summer that I can remember, the pool was the center of attraction for this tiny arid hamlet. Hundreds of boys and girls splashed and swam in the refreshing waves from opening hour until closing. Eight o'clock each morning, except for Sundays, herds of children would line up for swimming lessons. Towels in hand and swimsuits adorned, they followed their instructor to the water's edge and waited for their commands.

Anxious mothers sat in the covered bleachers as they talked away the morning, and watched their water babies bob in the sparkling liquid sun. Step by step the instructors would take them through the various stages of learning to swim. Blowing bubbles, the "turtle float", dog paddles, and finally full-fledged swimming.

The water was only two feet deep at that end of the pool and swimming was fearless since the bottom was just at toes reach. It was great fun, but some of us longed for the day we could go to the "deep end". That mysteriously, wondrous place where all the big and brave kids swam. The place where even a few brave souls soared into the air from the low, medium or high diving boards and then headlong into the abyss.

I will never forget the day our instructor said, "tomorrow, the deep end." A collective gasp was heard from our wet, little huddle. Mouths and eyes were wide open with disbelief. Fear, excitement, and shivering trepidation all coursed through my being. The day had finally come that I had both longed for and dreaded. Tomorrow, the deep end! Just think of it. What would it be like? Would I survive? Would it be fun? What would it bring? Tomorrow. The unknown.

Many of my little buddies refused to go to the other end of the pool. They liked the security of the shallow water, and their mothers didn't want them there either. They stayed in the shallow end and splashed the rest of the summer away, but I knew where I was heading. I knew there was more.

It is obvious that I survived that “tomorrow” and conquered the deep end. It was a great adventure, and one of those memorable experiences of life. We are now living in the midst of one of those memorable experiences of life as we all walk through this pandemic of COVID-19. Talk about jumping into the deep end of the unknown! We have never been in this situation before, and prayerfully we will never experience this again.

We have no idea how long this will last or the depths of residual damage that will remain once it has subsided. One thing I do know is that we will be forever changed. Much will change, but not all of that change is bad. I believe with all my heart that God is using this and will continue to use this crisis for our good and His glory. He has pushed us out of our comfortable pews and into a world that we have been commanded to reach with the Gospel. He has forced us to depend on Him and trust His Word. Some of us for the very first time have come to truly understand that this is His church and not ours.

God has forced us into the deep end! We can no longer remain in the shallows and just wade and splash. Now is the time for us to get out of our comfort zones and dive into the depths of His wonder and grace. Scary? Yes! Is it new and different? Yes. Will everything ever get back to normal? Yes, but it will be a new normal.

The great news is that each and every day we begin again brand new. Each new morning gives us the opportunity to start fresh and new. What will this day bring? Will I just survive or will I thrive? Will it be fun, or will it be filled with failure.

The answer to all of these questions and more lies in the future. The question is, will you remain in the shallow end, or will you determine that on this new day, “the deep end.” Most of us have waded around in the shallow end of life far too long, and if we don’t do something soon, that is where we will stay. Shallow. God has the depths of His love and grace for us to swim within. A bit fearful?

Come on in. The water’s fine. Put your toes on the edge, lean forward into His arms and jump.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tim Patterson is Executive Director/Treasurer of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. Elected unanimously in May of 2015, Patterson formerly served for 9 years as pastor of Hillcrest Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla. He also served as trustee chair and national mobilizer for the North American Mission Board.

Dare to reset your priorities

By Tony Lynn

PLYMOUTH, MI – I lived in Flint as a child during the 1960's. It was the era of big cars, smoky factories, black and white TV's and simple-stick homes built for the rapidly expanding population of factory workers. Children played freely outside with one another, and only returned home when the street lights or porch lights came on at nightfall.

I remember when my tonsils became so large that my voice changed into a laughingly, weird sound. At first it was amusing and I entertained my sister and cousins. Days later, my throat hurt so badly that I completely stopped speaking. As I laid motionless and silent on the couch, Mom gently rubbed the front of my neck up and down with her small soft hand. With each movement, I felt what seemed like large marbles in my throat. To me it was a mystery, but my mother said in a reassuring voice and with a smile on her face, "It's time we go see Dr. Nitz."

The doctor spoke to mom asking about the family and work. Then Dr. Nitz removed the chrome lid off of a glass jar to remove what looked like the world's largest popsicle stick. I can still recall the "tinny" sound of that lid opening and closing on top of the glass. Dr. Nitz approached me with a bright light shining from the band on his forehead and with what now looked, to a little boy, like a broomstick in his hand. His fingers reeked of the aroma of his last cigarette as he pushed around deeper, deeper into my throat. Then side to side near the tonsils. The force of his push could not stop the painful gagging. After Dr. Nitz pulled back, he squeezed my knee to comfort my lurching then he turned to Mom and said, "Those tonsils need to come out as soon as possible." Little did I know that statement meant pain and fun.

Today, I can take you to the vacant lot near the corner of South Ballenger and Beecher Roads, in Flint, where the hospital once stood and where my tonsils were extracted. Even now the unkept trees, bushes and grass reveal what remains of the circle driveway that approached the intimidating doorway to the hospital. The pavement and building are long-gone, but the memory of that event is still very fresh in my memory. I can still recall the pain after the surgery. Back in those days, there was no such thing as outpatient surgery. Everyone remained in the hospital-bed recovering for two to three days. Fortunately, the discomfort in my throat morphed into something less painful with each new morning.

The fun during those days came in the form of a doctor's prescription for my pain. I remember immediately after the surgery was over and I was coming out of my gas-induced sleep, the doctor standing at my bedside winked at my parents and said, "The best thing for this little man's pain is for him to eat as much ice cream as he can." With that commission given to me by a professional, I set-out to eat six portions of ice cream a day. It was a dream come true.

In the midst of that pain and fun, I learned something important that I sometimes forget as an adult. I learned that I could not wait until I was playing with my sister, my cousins and my

friends, again. There was no ice cream that was going to replace those people in my life. I wanted to return to my relationships with family and friends.

I have some important questions for you. You might want to get out a pen and paper. You might want to print these questions out and create your own worksheet. There is a command on this page that will allow you to print this article on your printer.

After you are released from the COVID-19 quarantine, what are your next steps?

1. Will you return to life as normal?
2. Will you find a new, improved normal?
3. Has this time of solitude made you rethink your priorities?
4. Would you write down what activities filled your hours pre-COVID?
5. Do all of those pre-COVID appointments need to go back on your calendar?
6. What was the reward from those pre-COVID scheduled events?
7. What new priorities came to your mind during the quarantine?
8. What specific steps do you need to take to secure the new priorities/appointments?
9. With whom will you share your plan so that they can hold you accountable?
10. Will you post reminders throughout your life to remind you of your new priorities?

Before I let you scoot-off to reset your priorities, let me share with you one of my most-valued COVID-discoveries. My COVID-discovery and one of my reset priorities is simple. Like the little man in the hospital, during the 1960's eating ice cream, I want to return to my relationships with family and friends. But, I want to nurture those relationships better than ever before.

Therefore, looking two to three months in-advance I am going to place "personal" appointments on my calendar, when I am off of work, and spend it with family and friends. My free-time is no longer going to be wasted-time. I want to spend my time with my loved-ones and with those who yet don't know the love of Christ.

I am going to reset my priorities now so that I am prepared when my day of release, from COVID-19 quarantine, comes. I dare you to reset your priorities. Answer the ten questions above for yourself and reset your priorities for a more meaningful life.

The Bible says, "Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days. Don't act thoughtlessly, but understand what the Lord wants you to do," (Ephesians 5:16-17, NLT). I love those words!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tony Lynn is the State Director of Missions for the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. Before coming on staff at the BSCM, Tony served as lead pastor for more than six years at Crosspoint Church in Monroe, Michigan. He and his wife, Jamie, also served with the International Mission Board in Africa and in Europe.

COVID-19 has a face

By Mike Durbin

PLYMOUTH, MI – For most of us, Covid-19 now has a face - the face of someone we know and love. What started as an invisible virus in a faraway place encircled the globe and walked through our neighborhoods. We are grateful that the overwhelming number of people who are infected will recover and experience no lasting physical effects. “Overwhelming majority” is not all, and our hearts go out to all those who lost family, friends, and neighbors. We pray God’s peace and comfort will surround them during this time.

It’s remarkable how quickly and completely the Covid-19 Pandemic affected our lives. We felt its impact not just physically, but financially, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. For weeks, the leading medical professionals in our country have been telling us to socially distance ourselves from others. In message after message, we have been warned that it is potentially dangerous to get closer than six feet to another person. We listened and complied for our own safety and the safety of others. The nation basically shut down as we work together to “Flatten the Curve.”

As God’s people, we experienced another staggering reality of Covid-19: For the first time in more than 2000 years, the church could not gather corporately to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. We made the best of it with the many digital technologies that made it possible for us to celebrate the resurrection online. Even so, this has been a tough season for us as believers. We long to worship and serve with our brothers and sisters in Christ as the church gathered.

That day will come, and we rejoice in that expectation. But it is becoming more and more apparent that we will not gather like we did in early March any time soon. Most, if not all, churches will not pick up where they left off. People, even the most faithful believers, will be leery of meeting with large groups. It’s only natural in light of what the experts have told us about social distancing. Much of the media is speculating that there will be no large gatherings at sporting events or concerts for much of the year. It is likely that people will return to our worship gatherings gradually as the infection rate slows and effective vaccines are discovered.

If that is the case, here are some discussion starters for churches to consider:

Prepare your facility – It’s reasonable to expect that the number of people attending corporate worship gatherings will be smaller in the days to come. The six-foot rule of social distancing will last for the foreseeable future and that will affect our gatherings. Our buildings need to reflect that possibility. What does it look like in your facility to follow the six-foot rule? Can you remove chairs or pews? Are there spaces you can set up as overflow? Do you need to have multiple smaller services?

Create a new greeter assignment – By that, I mean have someone with a contagious smile and love for people have the ministry of welcoming people to worship and opening the door for

them. Not everyone needs to touch the door. Strategically place people by all entrances to greet people enthusiastically, and open the door for them like they're royalty. Spoil them and protect them at the same time.

Replace handshakes and hugs – It's the most natural thing in the world to hug and shake hands at church. It's how we affectionately greet one another and express our joy at being together. Some are speculating that these customs need to go away. I doubt that will be the case, but they do need to go away for this season. Create a new greeting in your church. Use the deaf sign for "I love you" or lift your hands over your shoulder and shake them - the deaf sign for applause. Come up with your church's greeting.

Protect the vulnerable – Special precautions need to be made for those with pre-existing conditions and the elderly. I am particularly concerned for the many senior adults in our churches. After Michigan Governor Whitmer issued her Executive Order, Shar and I worshiped at home online with one of our churches. Several members of our family, all much older than us, physically went to their churches despite our concerns. We admire their dedication, but the Coronavirus threat is real. It has been devastating among senior adults. In pastoral love, we may need to proactively encourage the vulnerable to worship with us online for a season or make other appropriate opportunities available to them.

Keep your digital presence – Based on my conversations with Michigan Baptist pastors, more people are connecting with their church services online than were attending in person. That means that more and more people are hearing the Gospel! This pandemic has caused many people to ask questions about their spiritual lives. Your church's online presence gives them the opportunity to explore their spiritual lives from the comfort of their own homes. And later, when they feel comfortable, they may decide to attend in person.

How we are doing church is different now, and for the immediate future. Our methods are adapting, but our message remains unchangeable. When Jesus gave the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations to the first disciples, He knew that there would be vast oceans to cross, mountains to scale, and arid deserts to face. And yet, the church overcame all those obstacles to spread the Gospel. He also knew the challenges we would face with Covid-19. By His grace and guidance, we too will overcome all obstacles to spread the Gospel.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Durbin is the State Evangelism Director for the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. Before joining the state convention staff, Mike served as Church Planting Catalyst and Director of Missions in Metro Detroit since 2007. He also has served as a pastor and bi-vocational pastor in Michigan, as well as International Missionary to Brazil.

Shelter in place

By Mick Schatz

ROSCOMMON, MI – Growing up in Florida I spent a lot of time around the water, either at the beach, fishing in the rivers, or just chillin’ in the beautiful natural springs abundant all-around Central Florida. To help facilitate the enjoyment of our natural habitat, my dad bought my brother and I a bright red, sixteen-foot canoe. On one particular occasion we took the canoe in the river and paddled around to our favorite fishing spots. This was not as much fun as you might think because a canoe is not really meant to be in big open rivers, and paddling against the wind is extremely tiresome. Nevertheless, being young men, we had more brawn than brains, and were willing to throw caution to the wind if it meant catching more fish.

On this particular outing, a storm blew in while we were on the water. This is typical Florida weather, and another reason not to be on the wide river in a canoe with only two paddles for a motor! Summer storms bring lightning, and Florida is known to be the lightning capital of the United States. Where we were canoeing was also referred to as “Lightning Alley”. This storm proved no different, providing heavy rain, loud thunder and numerous amounts of lightning. We paddled very hard and as fast as we could to reach the shore and seek some sort of shelter. After what seemed like an eternity, we made land, tied the canoe off, and ran up onto the bank of the river. At that same moment, a huge bolt of lightning struck a tree about twenty yards (seemed like two feet) in front of us, and we instantly dropped flat on the ground like a sack of potatoes.

We were scared! There was nowhere to run, no shelter to take refuge, and no idea where lightning was going to strike next. I don’t totally remember, but I feel as if there was a lot of forgiveness asked and bargains made during those ten or so minutes hugging the dirt. Needless to say, as soon as it was safe we paddled quickly back to the dock, loaded up our canoe, and drove home with only wide-eyed looks at each other to communicate what we were feeling. We never took the canoe out in the river again, and we upgraded to a boat with a motor (that’s a whole other story).

Why the story you ask? As we all have been processing through COVID-19 and all of its unique challenges, we have been inundated with many new terms and phrases; “flatten the curve”, “social distancing”, “essential activity.”

The new phrase that brought back this particular fishing memory is the phrase “shelter in place.” On that particular fishing day, we found ourselves in great peril because we had no “shelter” to protect us and keep us safe. We felt helpless, alone, and frightened of an unforeseeable future. As we all have and still continue to journey through the oddities of this pandemic, its impact to the many facets of our lives, feeling helpless, alone, and scared can be a reality for all of us.

Thankfully as Christians, “shelter in place” means not just physical shelter, but most importantly, we have direct access to THE shelter, strong tower and refuge. Jesus is our place of retreat and safety. He is our port in the storm.

In Psalm 18:1-3, David verbalizes this reality of God's shelter by saying *“I love You, O LORD, my strength. The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer. My God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I will call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised; so shall I be saved from my enemies.”*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mick Schatz serves on the staff of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. He is the State Director of Spiritual Enrichment and Retreats and lives at Bambi Lake.

Soon but safe: Pastors urge courage, caution and compassion in reopening churches

By Tess Schoonhoven

NASHVILLE, TN (BP) – Even as some states begin the process of reopening, pastors eager to resume in-person church services are urging both courage and caution.

Worship teams, like this one at Roswell Street Baptist Church in Marietta, Ga., will be playing in empty sanctuaries a few more weeks -- a bit longer in some places. (Submitted photo) While they long to meet together again, many are not yet sure what a return will look like as the COVID-19 pandemic subsides. It likely varies by location and with each church's specific context -- which is why some envision a phased-in approach before returning to something resembling church services before the pandemic.

"We are not wanting our passion to exceed wisdom," said Wayne Robertson, pastor of Morningside Baptist Church in Valdosta, Ga. "We are trying our best to walk with that as faithfully as we know how."

It's all part of a process that will require careful planning, as well as the ability to adapt to sometimes rapidly changing circumstances. Ronnie Floyd, president and CEO of the SBC Executive Committee, said while everyone is asking when in-person church services can or will resume, the more important question is how they'll look when they do.

"Everything in the world has changed over these past few weeks," Floyd said. "Therefore, we must adapt to these changes in order to meet the challenges of today. The normal of yesterday will not be the normal for tomorrow.

"While we want to go back to church soon, we also want to go back to church safely."

While pastors and church leaders will likely consider similar questions to accomplish that goal, they might come up with different answers. And it's likely those answers will change over time and as circumstances change.

This week, Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp unveiled plans to reopen many businesses; the plans would allow in-person church services, though he asked that social-distancing guidelines be carefully followed.

"I urge faith leaders to continue to help us in this effort and keep their congregations safe by heeding the advice of public health officials," Kemp said at a news conference Monday (April 20).

Michael Lewis, pastor of Roswell Street Baptist Church in Marietta, Ga., said his team is cautiously planning to reopen as early as May 10, though the date is tentative and dependent on progress as measured by the official guidelines for reopening set out by the White House Coronavirus Task Force.

Lewis said Marietta, one of Atlanta's northern suburbs, is almost through the Phase 1 of the COVID-19 guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for reopening states. When the city enters Phase 2, Roswell Street Baptist, which averages about 700 in attendance Sunday morning, would conduct two worship-only services.

Two staff members would monitor two designated entrances. There would be no greeters, but those doors would remain open throughout the services. Attendees would be seated by household, with groups separated by at least six feet. They would be formally seated and dismissed in order to maintain social-distancing. Restroom use would be limited. The church would not print bulletins.

"We're going to adhere very strictly to the CDC guidelines," Lewis said, noting that the May 10 target date could be postponed if necessary.

Other pastors outlined similar protocols, even as they're not sure when they'll implement them. Micah Fries, pastor of Brainerd Baptist in Chattanooga, Tenn., expects an incremental approach.

"We anticipate that reopening will not be instantaneous," Fries said, "but rather more like a slow return over a period of months."

For Brainerd Baptist and other churches, those considerations include more than worship services, but also whether and when to resume Sunday school classes and programs for children and youth, as well as nursery care.

Brainerd Baptist's plans to return are complicated by several factors -- not the least of which is that while the church's main campus is in Chattanooga, another Sunday gathering takes place across the state line in Rossville, Ga., which means the church must consider the different guidelines and timelines issued by the states of Tennessee and Georgia.

Sundays at Brainerd's main campus averaged about 1,900 in attendance. The North Georgia campus drew about 300, while a Spanish-speaking service elsewhere in Chattanooga drew about 100.

"We believe it will be lengthy and, at times, unknown," Fries said. "We will take it slowly and show a lot of grace."

In Atlanta, Christ Covenant Church's plans are dependent in part on the availability of its venue at a public school. Jason Dee, Christ Covenant's pastor, said the 2 1/2-year-old church plant, which averages about 500 in attendance, might not be back to normal -- whatever that is -- until late summer.

With Sutton Middle School closed, Dee plans online-only services at least through May, though he said leaders might begin encouraging small groups to watch together.

"Georgia is beginning to open up, but we would want to see that doesn't increase the caseload in Georgia," Dee said. "We would want to see that people are actually practicing good social distancing guidelines before we even take that next step."

Robertson said Valdosta's Morningside Baptist, which averages about 350 in attendance, would consider conducting two services in order to maintain social-distancing, but suggested the church might begin instead with the now familiar drive-in service, where members of the congregation would remain in cars.

"It may be that they feel more comfortable [with a drive-in service]," Robertson said. "As you decide what you will do, you want your people to be happy and not thinking that they are taking a risk even if you had multiple services."

In the coming days, many pastors will search for the correct balance of courage and caution as they transition back to in-person gatherings. Dee urged compassion as church leaders and members navigate an uncertain path. He said encouraging the congregation to reengage was important, but acknowledging the continuing threat of COVID-19 infection -- and fears related to the pandemic -- was equally as important.

"I'm very confident in our pastors' and our elders' ability to find that balance," Dee said. "One of the reasons is they know their flock. They'll know where they probably need some nudging and where some may need some warning."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tess Schoonhoven is a Baptist Press staff writer.

Come back stronger

REDFORD, MI – This time of statewide lockdown has put a lot of pressure on churches and their pastors, but it has been a stressful time for church members. Michael and Odelle Caldwell have been members of the Temple of Faith Baptist Church in Detroit for more than 35 years.

Odelle has been meditating on a number of passages in the Bible including Psalm 91:2, "I will say to the Lord, he is my refuge and my fortress: My God; in him will I trust." That passage hits home for the Caldwells because Michael has had the coronavirus, but thankfully, is recovering. Odelle and Michael take daily walks together. It's a chance to mail a card, get some fresh air, and walk their dog, Major, who Odelle says "has been suffering from inactivity." The "Stay at Home" order has brought the Caldwell's family closer together than they were before the lockdown. They have four children and two grandchildren. Their children bring care packages to their home and leave them on the front porch. Odelle says waving from the window is difficult, adding that "virtual hugs are not the same." She says she and her oldest son rarely spoke and now he calls twice a day. They talk now more than before shutdown.

As far as church, the Caldwells say they are adjusting. Their church does a conference call for Sunday school and the church service. Odelle says, "We almost have it down to a science." Some ladies in the church have zoom meetings throughout the week for prayer and for fellowship. The church is even set up online for members to give.

The Caldwells ask for prayer. They pray that the Lord will continue to bind us together as a church family and that we will come back stronger and better able to serve Him in our respective ministries.

ABOUT THE CALDWELLS

Michael and Odelle Cadwell live in Redford, MI and attend Temple of Faith Baptist Church in Detroit MI. They have been members of this church for over 35 years. Michael and Odelle have been married for 42 years. They have 2 sons, 2 daughters, and 2 grandchildren (both boys).

Drive-in-Church: popcorn not included

By Dr. Michael Ritchie

ROSCOMMON, MI – “I’ve been just sitting by myself in the parking lot crying and praying for the last two Sundays. Asking God to help me get past this deep depression I’m going through” said Martha as I spoke to her (six feet away through my COVID-19 mask). The tears of gratitude were on her face as she and her husband sat in the church parking lot with their radio tuned to 106.7 FM waiting for the Pastor to share a word from God. This was Roscommon Baptist Church’s first ever Drive-In-Church service, and for Martha, it couldn’t have been better timing.

Certainly Drive-In-Church is not a new thing, but maybe for you and your church it could be. The idea comes from the Drive-In theatre days, when believe it or not, there was no such thing as streaming videos or even video cassette players!

Changing times, creative methods

As you are aware since the COVID-19 virus has arrived, churches have joined the rest of America by “Staying Home and Staying Safe”. The constitution says we have the right to assembly, but that is not the loving thing to do? A few churches around the country have found out that meeting anyway has resulted in the COVID death of their Pastor and other members. Churches have adapted to this “stay at home” order by doing various things to stay connected. Some churches have gone to online streaming on the internet. Others have been doing “Zoom” Bible studies or Facebook live. Calling and letter writing are still a good option.

What exactly is a “Drive-In-Church?”

Drive-In-Church is having the congregation come to the Church and together listen to a live message of their Pastor while in the comfort of their own vehicles. This is accomplished by an inexpensive FM transmitter attached to your church sound system, and the Pastor using a wireless mic to broadcast over an open FM channel. The signal is short range (300 yards), needs no FCC license, and comes in amazingly clear. The congregation is asked to stay in their vehicles, and then they are parked with their windows closed with space between each one. So that everyone can see tall vehicles in the back. With a donated transmitter and a little technical help, my wife Laurie was able to make all this work. If we at Roscommon Baptist Church can do it, so can your church.

The responsibility to share the Gospel

Though the conditions are not optimal, we still have the responsibility to “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine.” (2 Timothy 4:2) “You can’t believe how excited I am to get behind the pulpit,” my Pastor, Erikson Aldridge said.

It wasn't easy for any of the disciples in their day to share the gospel. The wind chill factor was driving the 40-degree Michigan day below freezing, but our spirits soared as we were able to assemble ourselves together as the body of Christ. Pastor Aldridge challenged the gathering out of the book of Romans 13:11-14 with the message, "The Year Of The Great Awakening" (The message can be seen here on YouTube - [PART 1](#), [PART 2](#)) Posting sermons on YouTube is another thing that is new for our church. The impact of doing a "Drive-In-Church"

Pastor Aldridge, Laurie and I tested the system Saturday, and it worked better than expected. The sound clarity was phenomenal. We called all our church members and hoped they would be willing to safely come join us in the morning. I was surprised at the level of excitement that each person had. "We will be there."

We had about 50 people join us for church Sunday morning in our first ever Drive-In-Church Service. The Word of God was preached. God's people were encouraged. I received a text from one of my friends saying, "That was an awesome service, tell the Pastor that is the best he has ever preached!"

As Martha and her husband left the parking lot, they stopped and rolled down the window and with tears in their eyes they said, "Thank you so much for holding the service today. We can't tell you how much it means to us."

Only God knows what eternal difference it will make that a small church in Northern Michigan stepped out of their comfort zone and held a drive-in church service? We plan to continue the outdoor services until we get the all clear from our Governor. It turns out that the Church is essential after all. Just ask Martha.

Tech Info

F-S Electronics 1W FM transmitter was hooked into our soundboard and the Pastor's lavalier microphone transmitted the signal to the sound board and out of the transmitter to the FM station of our choosing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Michael Ritchie grew up in Harrison Township, MI. He is married to Laurie Allan Ritchie and they live in Higgins Lake, MI, where they have practiced Chiropractic for 37 years. They have 2 grown children, Sarah and Jacob (Kaleigh) and are grandparents to Lucas. The Ritchie's were saved right out of college and were baptized in Bambi Lake. They have been serving God at Roscommon Baptist Church ever since. His motto is "As a church we need to think out of the box, while we are still above ground". Michael has led the church in many innovative ministries over the years all in the effort that they might win some. "Jesus Christ is my life, without Him am nothing".

Unseen opportunities

By Staff

ST. JOSEPH, MI – The Shore Church in St. Joseph has seen God show up in special ways throughout the statewide lockdown. The church like so many others has been forced into doing services on Facebook Live as well as other online services. Through this online presence, Pastor Kevin Hester says they have reached far more people than they would have during a normal week. Many of the people who had made promises to visit the church in the past are now watching online and have been contacting him about spiritual things.

Hester says, “Our reach and influence have just really grown.” The local newspaper did a feature story on how the church has adapted to the stay home order. That story has raised the church’s profile within the community and resulted in more people following them online.

Hester is the bi-vocational pastor at The Shore Church. He also works within law enforcement as a Sheriff’s deputy and police officer. He uses his “day job” to make new connections within the community, and invite them to church. The pastor/deputy says many of the people he meets are uncomfortable with church, and in the past he hasn’t been able to make any progress towards getting them to visit.

But Hester has noticed that “being able to join our services online has taken some of that fear and discomfort away.” He says his prayer is that when things go back to normal, they will feel connected enough to come in on Sunday mornings and we will be able to make real life connections with them.

Hester and his wife, Mary, have 8 children and four of them still live at home. Mary was already homeschooling the four at home so that part has not been as big a shift for them.

He says he tries to de-stress during the quarantine much the same way he would any other time. He turns off the media, enjoys getting out into creation by taking a walk and drinking in the sunshine and fresh air. He also enjoys just stopping to have time with my family, enjoy a movie, and play games together.

Pastor Hester is studying the book of James and meditating on the Book of Psalms. He says he returned to James because of his desire to make wise decisions during these difficult times. Hester adds, “James deals with faith and trials as well as watching what we say, and I feel that these are very important things during this pandemic.”

Hester is asking for prayer to balance everything, and be a good leader as his congregation navigates these difficult times. He says, “God is giving us greater influence and favor, and I believe Satan will be attacking our church in some way to try and thwart what God is doing.”

Fear in the time of quarantine

By Staff

LANSING, MI – Pastor Coye Bouyer’s biggest takeaway during the Covid-19 crisis is how many people are afraid and functioning in fear. He says, “The most challenging thing during the quarantine was the realization of the significant fear of so many people.”

Bouyer is the church planter of Kingdom Life Church in Lansing. He and his wife, Keturah, have four children and all are living at home. He says that in the midst of everything, Kingdom Life Church is doing well.

Like most churches, the “shelter at home” order has brought more people to their Facebook page since they moved their services online. Because they are getting more traffic on their page, Bouyer is trying to add more content about their church. Church leaders are assigned a certain number of people each week to reach out and check up on their members.

Bouyer is leading an online Bible study from the Book of Ruth. He says it’s to know that God is working, and for us to operate from a place of faith instead of fear and panic.

The pastor adds that there are positive things happening as well. He has been able to spend more time with his family. We have all been able to have a time of mandatory rest, and it gives us an opportunity to stop and hear God more clearly. That quiet has revealed many individual issues that have not been dealt with; things like, addictions, dysfunction, and our dependence on money and things. Those are all things we need to see before God can address them.

Bouyer’s prayer is that he, his family, and his church can all remember that God is in control. He adds, “Our lives are in his hands. He is working out His plans and ‘We are okay’.”

Living through “The 'Rona”

By Elaine Hill

WARREN, MI – Where does the church turn, when the state has put a “Stay Home” order in place? What do we do when our meeting place is now off limits? We are home and we, with our social media, are asking these questions to each other as a church family. We chat about all the things that are changing in our lives, yet how do we change lives for the kingdom? We, as a church, are living in a time like never before.

In recent months, our church has reignited GA's (Girls in Action) and RA's (Royal Ambassadors) on Wednesday nights. It's a wonderful student ministry that teaches missions and the importance of sharing the Gospel. I'm so happy it's back

So, back to the original topic. We are separated from each other due to COVID-19, better known as "The 'Rona". Since there had been such enthusiasm to study missionaries and do the fun things in the GA's and RA's groups, the teachers didn't want the momentum to fade with the stay-at-home distancing. When the quarantine all started, our church went to live streaming service on Facebook and YouTube. I thought to myself, "Why can't we "Zoom" with the kids and get them together to continue the mission studies and activities?" After a few calls to fellow teachers and tech folks in our church, we made a plan to get it rolling. After all, no better thing to share on social media than Jesus.

So, for the last 5 weeks, RA's and GA's have been gathering on their computers and having the time of their lives. Leaders are continuing to teach about missions, and we are actually having virtual relay races and games along with the study. Missionaries can be invited to visit the meeting LIVE and share their work with specific people groups with the kids. The kids enjoy being able to ask questions and learn about what it's like to be a missionary who is taking the Gospel message to different people groups around the world.

Attendance in our student mission groups is up substantially. I'm so excited to see how the Lord will continue this ministry. God works in ways we don't always understand. Though it has been tough being quarantined, He has certainly pointed us to how His word can still be shared.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elaine Hill works as Administrative Assistant to both Motor Cities Metro Baptist Association and Warren Woods Baptist Church, where she and her family are active members. She has gone on mission trips throughout the United States, Russia and Jordan. She serves on the Executive Board of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan on the church strengthening team. Women's ministry is an important facet, as she serves as Vice President with the WMU. She also leads women's ministry through her church and the community. Elaine has been married to Dan for 44 years and they have a grown son and daughter, and spend lots of time with their two precious grandchildren.

Looking forward, not backward

By Staff

DURAND, MI – Michigan Baptist churches have experienced the Covid-19 shutdown in many similar ways and in many different ways. John Nyhof is the pastor of Faith Baptist Church in Durand. He and his wife Sandy have served there for the past 6 years. Every church has suffered financially from the shutdown, but in John's case, he is a bi-vocational pastor who also worked in a local machine job. John has been laid off from that job at least until the lockdown is over.

The Nyhofs have two children still living at home, as well as four other adult children who are out on their own. John says he has avoided the stress by taking advantage of the additional time with his family, and by focusing on the Lord. Pastor Nyhof's family has been challenged on a very personal level. He has had to delay the memorial service after his mom passed away, and one of his daughters has had to postpone her wedding. As a pastor, he was unable to go comfort a member who had lost his wife. John says, "I am well aware of the crisis, but I choose not to dwell on it."

John has allowed other pastors to minister to him. He listens to David Jeremiah and John MacArthur, and in his quiet time he has been focusing on the book of Ephesians.

Faith Baptist has learned a lot about their ministry through the crisis. They are streaming their services on the church Facebook page, and they hosted Bible study and prayer time using Zoom. The church has been surprised at the response they are getting from the streamed services. There are many people tuning in who never once stepped into the building for church. Nyhof says streaming is something they will continue to do once they are able to meet together again, and they hope that these digital visitors will become live visitors when they reopen. Church members are doing a great job of staying in touch through cards, phone calls and social media.

Faith Baptist and their pastor are looking forward instead of backward. Nyhof asks for prayer, "That the Lord will continue to lead now, and guide us once the restrictions are lifted."

First-Person: How to manage social distancing fatigue

By Willie McLaurin

NASHVILLE, TN (BP) – The coronavirus has propelled our world overnight into patterns that are not normal. Many of us had never heard the term "social distancing" until health professionals

recommended that this is the solution toward "flattening the curve" of new coronavirus infections.

The initial rush to stock up on toilet tissue, sanitizing wipes and groceries was unprecedented. Aisle 13 at the local store was left with nothing but price labels and signs with purchase limit restrictions. The trusted world of Amazon Prime brought added disappointment as delivery times went from two or three days to four to six weeks.

In most crises, we are accustomed to being inconvenienced for a few days or a few weeks. Now we find our community in an extended season of social distancing.

This reality set in when pastors encouraged their church members to join worship through technology. The first few weeks many churches were scrambling to ensure that online worship and online giving were up and working. The innovation of transitioning to virtual ministry absorbed much of our energy. We were hopeful to gather on campus for Easter worship, only to have our hopes dashed by social distancing extensions. Community as we know it has been put on pause, and for many this has become frustrating.

The real test of social distancing is now upon us. How do we maintain our sanity after Easter? How do we stay motivated and on mission when the world as we once knew it exists no more? Let's face it, how many more days can you stay in the house serving as resident spouse, professor, chef and cosmetologist? Your daily routine involves moving from one room to the next praying that it's your turn to make the weekly grocery run.

In a real way many have experienced or will experience what I label "Social Distancing Fatigue." Social Distancing Fatigue (SDF) is the cumulative effect of embracing new behaviors for survival that compound over time to a point of exhaustion. Here are three ways to manage social distancing fatigue?

Stay rooted in the faith – I would suggest a steady diet of prayer, bible reading and personal worship. Read through the Psalms or choose a Gospel to read through. Commit to adding five minutes to your prayer time each week. I am reminded of the church marquee that read, "Seven days without prayer makes one weak."

Colossians 2:5-7 says, "For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is. So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness."

Stay connected to your family – "The family that prays together stays together." That phrase has been around since 1947. I am convinced that one of the ways to stay fresh and to manage social distancing fatigue is to spend time engaging with your family. My family and I have instituted one hour each day for family engagement time, better known as game time. During those 60 minutes, we have resurrected games such as Uno, Monopoly and Connect Four. My

family is very competitive, and this competitiveness has been a way to release social distancing stress in a healthy way.

Technology has been a blessing, allowing our family to stay in touch with family members in different locations. The ability to spend a few moments communicating with family and hearing their stories is therapeutic. Be sure to carve out time for family members to express how they are coping amid social distancing.

Encourage family members to journal their thoughts from day to day. Journaling allows people to clarify their thoughts and release their emotions in a healthy way.

Stay engaged with your fellowship – There is something special and scriptural about the local church gathering together in fellowship. Psalm 133 declares, "How good and how pleasant it is when God's people gather together in unity."

I love the energy and excitement from gathering on the local church campus. During social distancing, there is sometimes a feeling of helplessness and fatigue. Take time to pray for fellow believers; write encouraging notes, text or call. You'll be amazed at how staying engaged will assist you in this season. Here are two simple nuggets to hold on to during social distancing:

Do good – Find a way to do something good for someone else during COVID-19. People of faith receive blessings by extending our hearts and hands to encourage others. "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." (Galatians 6:10)

Don't give up – Everyone wants to know: "How long will this season last?" I can't give you that answer, but I can assure you that you have the power to last. When we practice doing good, we will receive the energy and the grace to see God's perfect will for our lives through this season. Paul reminds us: "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:6)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Willie McLaurin is vice president for Great Commission Relations and Mobilization with the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee.

Thinking about death—and life—and ministry in the middle

By Eric Reed

SPRINGFIELD, IL – I find myself thinking about Jack Anders* right now. Jack was relatively a young man when he accepted the pastorate of a large established church in a popular oceanside community in Florida. The church was approaching 100 years old and so were many of its members.

Jack lived not far from where I did. We had church friends in common, so I heard about his struggle.

Jack had to perform three funerals in his first week on the job, as I recall the story now 30 years old, and pace never let up. He buried well over 100 people in just a couple of years—and it got to be too much. People wondered why Jack quit what was considered by many pastors a “plum” church—large, well-funded, agreeable, pleasant people, in a really nice town. But it got to him.

Death.

Pastors can get bothered by death, even as we preach life and the very real hope we have in the One who overcame death on our behalf.

The disease and its realities are drawing closer. And as a pastor, I’m finding ministry in this environment challenging. It may become more so as weeks stretch into months.

As with any personal crisis, events such as this cause us to stop at least briefly to examine our theology. Then we affirm our faith and, if we choose, move forward. This process may need to be quick in a crisis situation, but it will become all the more important given the scale of the pandemic.

I agree with those whose first response was to say this could be the church’s greatest opportunity. But in holding up the challenge to others, I want to be careful not to overstate the case. I’m trying to minister optimistically, but cautiously, if those two can operate simultaneously. In times like these, I will:

Offer no pat answers.

“God is in control” is the ultimate response, but like the average 4-year-old, people will ask “Why?” They should not be chided for that. And we pastors should be open enough to say, “I’ll think about and get back to you,” instead of offering a quick reply. And sometimes we should say, “I don’t know why” or “We may never know why this side of heaven.” Bumper sticker admonitions don’t comfort for long.

Preach about it.

They say don't preach your uncertainties, and generally I would agree. But I think we can point toward people in Scripture who endured similar struggles and asked the familiar question, Why does God allow trials such as this? Some plagues were clearly judgments from God. Other illnesses were, as Jesus said of Lazarus, that the glory of God might be displayed. To some he said, "It rains on the just and the unjust." And as with the blind man in John 9, "It was no one's fault."

Pray honestly.

The Psalms are full of honest, even gut-wrenching prayers that can guide our own intercession, both in private and in public. I'm finding in my Facebook teachings and Zoom prayer meetings, I need to salt the "buck up and believe" messages with some candid address to deeper, sometimes nagging feelings. The psalmists can do that for us, without prayer time becoming a public letting of blood or spleen.

Create emotional space.

The Epistles, especially Paul's, are often prescriptive: Do this, don't do that. And in seasons of trial we need some clear instruction to rejoice, believe, and endure. But we also need to offer people room to work through their feelings. That's where stories of faithful people who wrestled with troubling circumstances are helpful. The Old Testament is full of them. Some grappled to the conclusion of belief, while some did not. Those whose souls we shepherd can learn from both examples, if given room to process their feelings.

In general, our people need to know they are not alone in their emotions. We all struggle with these life-altering issues. Like Jacob after his championship round with the angel, we may find ourselves marked (or even a little hobbled) by the match, but that's ok.

Point to life.

Ultimately, Jesus is the answer to life's persistent questions. The Victor over death has given us the victory. As such, he is God's eternal response to any temporal trouble. That is not trite—or pat. For those who follow Christ and those who preach Christ, he is the inevitable conclusion to any season of fear, doubt, or uncertainty. Christ walks with us every step of the way, and he is waiting for us at the end of a bumpy journey.

About 15 years ago I preached the funeral of a godly young woman, the mother of three small children who caught flesh eating-bacteria at a swimming pool and died three days later. On the Sunday after her funeral, I reached John 11 in my sermon series: Lazarus, come forth! After shouting Jesus' great declaration that freed his friend from the grave, I had to admit that my own friend had not come out from the grave that week—but eventually she would.

I admitted that it hurt.

I told the congregation I had to take comfort where I could. There was solace in Jesus' tears for his own dear friend. "That's when your sermon became real," an elder pastor said to me afterward. "That's when I could accept that God still cared about our friend, even if he didn't raise her up right now."

We need to be reminded that the One who raised Lazarus is himself the promised Resurrection. He's also the One who grieves with the grieving. There's comfort in both.

**name changed*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eric Reed is editor of Illinois Baptist media.

LifeWay presents 'unprecedented opportunity' for churches and families to do VBS

By Joy Allmond

NASHVILLE, TN – The coronavirus pandemic has forced events to cancel, education to be modified and businesses to temporarily close or adjust operations.

But for LifeWay and the kids ministries it serves, Vacation Bible School (VBS) is still on.

"VBS is the highlight of the summer for most churches, and the highlight of the year for most kids ministries," said Chuck Peters, director of operations for LifeWay Kids.

"And it is the most evangelistic outreach that most churches do all year. It's centered on Jesus and the message of salvation. That message must be heard and must not be deterred or deferred. There is urgency around the gospel. That urgency is only amplified during a time of crisis."

To effectively—and safely—utilize this important strategy to reach communities this year, LifeWay is rolling out [four VBS options](#) for churches. Church leaders can choose the format that works best for their context and that meets guidelines set by local health authorities.

The four options, in keeping with the planned ["Concrete & Cranes"](#) theme are:

1. **Traditional VBS** — This is the “VBS as usual” approach. For some contexts, VBS can happen as it always has if it’s safe to meet as usual. Churches may have to change the initially-planned date, but VBS can still happen as planned.
2. **Neighborhood VBS** — Churches can deploy volunteers to conduct socially-distanced VBS programs in driveways, on front porches, in backyards or in cul-de-sacs. This approach uses church-member “hosts” in multiple neighborhoods throughout your community to conduct a small-scale VBS at their homes. This could be a great solution for groups that are able to meet in smaller numbers.
3. **Alternate VBS** — Churches can use alternative timetables such as conducting VBS over several consecutive weeks (e.g. Wednesday nights, Sunday nights, Saturdays), as a back-to-school kick-off, or over Labor Day weekend or fall break. This approach allows churches to still do a delayed VBS in a low-maintenance, low-prep manner.
4. **VBS at Home** — VBS materials can be directly delivered to homes. Churches can post or livestream media-driven worship rallies to engage kids as viewers and use delivery methods to equip parents to facilitate Bible study, recreation, and crafts at home.

“We need to think of VBS as a content-based experience, not necessarily as a gathering. It's fundamentally about connecting kids to the gospel through music, Bible teaching and activities,” said Peters.

“Ultimately, those things do not require a large gathering. Once we realize that VBS might look different than we are accustomed to, we can come up with all sorts of creative ways to accomplish the heart of its ministry like we have never done before.”

As a part of launching the four options, LifeWay Kids also developed a new free e-book, “4 Ways to Do VBS This Summer.” This resource is intended to help church leaders, volunteers and parents understand their options, instruct them in how to approach new strategies and inspire them to leverage VBS in new ways.

“The response to these options has been overwhelmingly positive,” said Peters. “It is possible that what might at first seem like an obstacle could turn into an unprecedented opportunity for the ministry of VBS to reach farther than ever before.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joy Allmond is a writer for LifeWay Christian Resources.

Deaf ministry and the new normal

By Phyllis Harbaugh

STERLING HEIGHTS, MI – As I reflect on the past 18 months of ministry to the Deaf, I am humbled by the way God has used us to touch the lives of so many! He has opened doors in places we never imagined.

With the Coronavirus on the rampage, staying home has been very hard for our Deaf friends. They depend so much on visual social contact, and feeling safe in the “normal” things of life. When things are not “normal” they struggle to get information so they can understand what is happening. Many do not have internet access and live alone. We are sending “snail mail”, email, VP mail (visual phone) and text mail every week to stay in touch and help any way we can.

My family is doing well through this crisis. All of my kids are able to work from home and so far, no lay-offs. My husband, Herb, and I are learning how to make Facebook livestream videos (which I interpret for the Deaf) for our Sunday, Wednesday and Deaf Worship services. They are posted on Facebook and YouTube under “Memorial Baptist Church Sterling Heights, Michigan”.

One of the Deaf ladies has no internet access, so I took the VP (Video Phone) camera and put the interpreted service from Facebook on my desktop. With the VP camera, she could see the entire service. Immediately, she started signing the songs along with the video. She was so happy we found a way she could come to worship. ThankYou for your continued prayer and financial support. You are a great part of all God is doing.

PRAYER NEEDS

- PRAY for three of our Deaf Friends who have the virus
- PRAY for two of our Deaf friends who have committed their life to Christ this month.
- PRAY the Deaf will not fear but trust in God’s peace
- PRAY Deaf people will be open to the gospel
- PRAY that Deaf Christians will be bold in sharing their faith
- PRAY that lifestyle witnessing will show the love of Christ
- PRAY for interpreters, that communication will be clear
- PRAY for the Iraqi refugees that we are building relationships with. That they will see Christ in us.

2020 MINISTRY NEEDS

- Flannel for blankets we make for Cancer Center
- Small birthday gifts (given out monthly)
- Christmas gifts (given out in December)
- Gas Cards (we provide transportation for 4-5 people)

- Postage Stamps (for monthly Newsletter & birthday Cards)
- Gift Cards for non-food items not covered with food stamps (Walmart, Kroger, Walgreens, CVS)
- Office supplies (Paper, Card stock, mailing labels)

For more information, contact phyllisharbaugh@comcast.net.

Send Relief global COVID-19 response reaches 45 nations

By Brandon Elrod

ALPHARETTA, GA (BP) – As COVID-19 started becoming a global pandemic, Send Relief staff began making preparations around the world to serve communities they knew would be hit hard by the medical and economic impact of the virus.

Missionaries and volunteers in North America have helped distribute nearly 50,000 various types of personal protection equipment to medical facilities and provided more than 66,000 meals in New York City, New Orleans, Pittsburgh and Puerto Rico, as well as thousands of care packages for healthcare workers and first responders.

Internationally, Send Relief has dozens of projects related to COVID-19 in more than 40 nations around the globe. Through Send Relief, International Mission Board (IMB) missionaries have been providing medical and sanitary resources as well as food to under-resourced areas.

"The scope of Send Relief's work on COVID-19 projects around the world is amazing -- not only here in the U.S. but in 45 nations around the world and over 140 ongoing ministry projects," said Bryant Wright, president of Send Relief. "It has been a joy to get to know our Send Relief staff as the international and national efforts are working closely together."

The North American Mission Board (NAMB) and the IMB announced plans to cooperate in compassion ministry efforts just weeks before the coronavirus pandemic became an international crisis.

Several hospitals and healthcare facilities in villages and towns across Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas have received personal protection equipment, sanitary cleansers and supplies of oxygen through Send Relief partners, aiding their ability to better care for critically ill patients.

Send Relief has worked around the world to coordinate food and supply distributions to overlooked populations, including remote villages and regions that have not received the same support as many urban areas.

Refugees who fled their homes due to violence, natural disasters or other causes of instability lost their sources of food and sanitary items once COVID-19 began affecting their communities. Send Relief has helped support food distributions for thousands of refugees.

In the United States, which has the highest number of confirmed coronavirus cases and deaths, Send Relief efforts have focused on serving vulnerable populations and the healthcare workers and first responders on the frontlines of the pandemic.

Taylor Field, a Send Relief missionary in New York City, which is the epicenter in the U.S., has supported those with food insecurity for many years. Field knew that, though the strategy would need to change to adhere to guidelines for social distancing, he would continue reaching out to and serving in the midst of the crisis.

"We have had to streamline the numbers of volunteers and aim for only five volunteers to be in a room," Field said. "Since our ministry is considered by the city as essential services, volunteers are still able to come to serve."

Volunteers there are wearing masks and teaching those who come for food about social distancing and other hygiene practices designed to help at-risk populations combat COVID-19.

Similar outreaches have been taking place across the United States through Send Relief, resulting in thousands receiving services; many are hearing the Gospel. Missionaries are building relationships with those in their communities that should last over the long term.

"A nurse from University Medical Center sent me a text after we dropped off care bags for the healthcare workers," said Kay Bennett, a Send Relief missionary in New Orleans. "She had given the care packs to all the units and had even shared some with the cafeteria workers. She shared how thankful they all were and how encouraging it is to know that people care about them and are thinking of them."

As Send Relief continues and expands its efforts to serve those most affected by the COVID-19 crisis, Southern Baptists can get involved, either by serving their communities using the ministry guides Send Relief offers through its website or by donating financial resources to help fuel the work of national and international missionaries. Visit sendrelief.org/donate/covid-19.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brandon Elrod writes for the North American Mission Board.

LifeWay trustees authorize exploration of the sale of Ridgecrest

By Carol Pipes

NASHVILLE, TN – LifeWay Christian Resources’ board of trustees authorized a recommendation for the organization’s executive team to pursue viable options for the disposition of Ridgecrest Conference Center and Summer Camps including, but not limited to, transfer or sale to SBC entities, state conventions or other external parties.

The trustee executive committee presented the recommendation to the full board of trustees during a meeting held via Zoom on April 23. The board unanimously supported LifeWay scheduling exploratory site visits with potential buyers.

“This was a painful decision,” said LifeWay CEO Ben Mandrell. “LifeWay’s leaders have prayed over this decision and looked at multiple options to keep Ridgecrest. The more than 100-year-old conference center has a rich heritage and spiritual legacy for Southern Baptists. However, the decision is a necessary one.”

Mandrell said he appreciated the trustees’ support in making this decision. In 2013 LifeWay trustees authorized the sale of Glorieta Conference Center in New Mexico.

Ridgecrest Conference Center and Summer Camps hosts 70,000 guests annually for various events involving churches, Christian associations, other ministries, families, and individuals. Among these are several offered by LifeWay, including Centrifuge, CentriKid and Student Life Camps, Black Church Leadership and Family Conference, and others. In addition, Camp Ridgecrest for Boys and Camp Crestridge for Girls operate at near capacity during the summer months.

Mandrell cited changes in organizational strategy, rising costs, and uncertainty due to COVID-19 as reasons for the transfer of the property.

In mid-March, Buncombe County, N.C., authorities ordered the closure of all non-essential businesses to help stop the spread of COVID-19. Ridgecrest has temporarily ceased hosting groups until local authorities lift restrictions on groups physically gathering.

“As a matter of fiscal stewardship during such an uncertain season, LifeWay must control costs and manage resources in order to continue serving local churches in the most effective way,” he said.

“Owning a conference center and the adjoining girls and boys camps requires significant operational and increasing financial investment,” Mandrell said.

“As we’ve been clarifying the focus of LifeWay’s strategic mission, we’ve been asking whether or not owning and maintaining a conference center is the wisest way forward in terms of stewardship,” Mandrell said. “While LifeWay will continue to host camps and events, we realize we don’t need to own a hospitality facility to provide those experiences.”

Mandrell said in order for Ridgecrest to thrive in the future, “it will require a significant increase in financial investment over the next 10 years. We believe our focus must be on the overall sustainability and extension of LifeWay’s core ministry. Owning a conference center will require more financial investment than we can bear.”

He said LifeWay’s preference would be to find a buyer that would continue to offer a Christian conference center environment and the operations of the boys and girls camps. “Due to significant LifeWay investments over the past six years, Ridgecrest is well-positioned for future success under new ownership,” Mandrell said. “Finding a buyer who can make the ongoing investments necessary to maintain Ridgecrest’s current high standards of hospitality and service is the right thing to do for the future of Ridgecrest and LifeWay.”

LifeWay is providing [answers to frequently asked questions](#) about the disposition of Ridgecrest Conference Center and Summer Camps.

About Ridgecrest Conference Center

Ridgecrest Conference Center is owned and operated by LifeWay (formerly the Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention). Ridgecrest was chartered in 1907 near Asheville, N.C., holding its first event in 1909. Today, Ridgecrest hosts 70,000 visitors annually for a variety of events. Camp Ridgecrest for Boys has been in operation since 1929. Camp Crestridge for Girls was opened in 1955.

About LifeWay Christian Resources

In operation since 1891, LifeWay Christian Resources is one of the world’s largest providers of Christian resources, including Bibles, books, Bible studies, Christian music and movies, gifts and church supplies, as well as camps and events for all ages. Headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee, LifeWay receives no denominational funding and operates as a self-supporting nonprofit.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carol Pipes is director of Corporate Communications at LifeWay.