

STITCHING A NEW GARMENT: HOLISTIC DISCIPLESHIP DURING COVID-19

Albert Hung, District Superintendent,
Northern California District Church of the Nazarene

Stitching a New Garment

In a very short time, the COVID-19 health crisis has drastically changed how we work, learn, shop, play, and worship. Extended isolation, a floundering economy, and a protracted fight against an invisible enemy have left us feeling disoriented and exhausted. In such times of fear and uncertainty, Christians rely on worship, ritual, and community for comfort and strength. This helps explain why, after weeks of sheltering-in-place, many congregations have been drawn back to the sanctuary despite clear evidence that religious gatherings present ideal conditions for the virus to spread, endangering the safety of our most vulnerable members.¹

Of course, to say that people miss going to church would be to ignore the reality that worship attendance in the US has been in decline for years, well before the arrival of the coronavirus. In post-Christian Northern California, where I serve as district superintendent for the Church of the Nazarene, most of our neighbors haven't noticed or cared that our houses of worship have gone dark. Our gatherings have been deemed a "non-essential service." Before we rush to reopen our doors, then, perhaps we ought to consider whether we *should*, at least in the manner we did before the pandemic. As author and activist Sonya Renee Taylor observes,

*We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was never normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return, My friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature.*²

Our lives have been turned upside down; and yet, disruption has created opportunity. In this liminal season, we have been given space to consider whether the church's pre-corona existence is something worth returning to. If our poorly attended gatherings were an indication of a church that has drifted from God's intended purpose, then we should not miss this chance to "stitch a new garment" together. Now is the time to ask, "Why do we gather? Who are our gatherings for? What should be happening when we are together? Are we missing the mark?" Exposing a religious culture that had become shallow and toxic, and therefore offensive to God, was a common theme in the Scriptures. Consider the strong rebuke issued by the prophet Isaiah, speaking on God's behalf to an unfaithful community:

¹ High COVID-19 Attack Rate Among Attendees at Events at a Church - Arkansas, March 2020. (2020, May 21). Retrieved June 23, 2020, from <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6920e2.htm>

² Instagram, Sonya Renee Taylor. Retrieved June 23, 2020, from <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-fc3ejAlvd/?hl=en>

*Quit your worship charades. I can't stand your trivial religious games: Monthly conferences, weekly Sabbaths, special meetings - meetings, meetings, meetings - I can't stand one more! Meetings for this, meetings for that. I hate them! You've worn me out! I'm sick of your religion, religion, religion, while you go right on sinning. When you put on your next prayer-performance, I'll be looking the other way. No matter how long or loud or often you pray, I'll not be listening.*³

In this season of increased isolation and reliance on technology, COVID-19 is causing the church to reexamine the tenor, format, and purpose of our corporate gatherings and adapt our approach to spiritual formation. Holistic discipleship that incorporates instruction, imitation, and immersion into the communal life of the church has become challenging, but not impossible. In fact, the current constraints on our ministry may very well be driving the innovations necessary for the church to thrive in a changing world.

Why We Gather as the Church

The apostle Paul explained to philosophers in Athens that, “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.”⁴ We do not gather for worship because God needs our praise, but because worship a means of grace by which God continues to remake us in His image. Worship is necessary for our ongoing redemption and for all human flourishing.

Our church gatherings meet our universal need for connection. We are social beings made in the image of a relational God. Our gatherings also serve a formative purpose. As we participate in the liturgy, partake of communion, sing songs of praise, study the holy scriptures, confess our sins, and discern the will of God together, we learn what it means to be a part of God’s family and a citizen of heaven. Our worship is also a witness to our neighbors, a picture and preview of the coming kingdom of God, in which all things have been redeemed by Christ. In this sense, worship is an expression of and invitation into our mission.

All aspects of our shared life together as Christians are formative and therefore a means of discipleship. What passes for community in the American church, however, pales in comparison to the deep, full-bodied fellowship experienced by the early believers, who met together daily to sit under the apostles’ teaching, break bread, pray, and care for one another. They had a positive reputation among their neighbors and the church grew as a result.⁵ Their gatherings were both formative and evangelistic in nature.

Church history, human psychology, and common sense tell us that we cannot grow to our full potential as followers of Jesus unless we physically gather. However, our gatherings often fail to take advantage of what we know about human development. Thanks to the Enlightenment, we tend to view right thinking as the foundation of discipleship and mark of Christian maturity.

³ The Holy Bible, *Isaiah 1:13-15 (MSG)*.

⁴ The Holy Bible, *Acts 17:24-25 (NIV)*.

⁵ The Holy Bible, *Acts 2:42-47 (NIV)*.

Preaching, Sunday School, and midweek Bible studies therefore become the means by which we deliver instruction to our people. But the goal of discipleship is not to produce smart people, but to produce loving people. As the Apostle Paul observed, “knowledge puffs up, while love builds up.”⁶ Therefore, we need more than good content; we also need a community in which to practice the art of Christlike love. The apostle James observed, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”⁷ Worship that is pleasing to God is not only a matter of what we do in the sanctuary, but ultimately a matter of what we do in society. This means that in addition to receiving sound instruction, we need to be in close relationship with people whose faith is worth imitating and engage in immersive experiences that help us better represent Jesus in the world. Churches that consistently produce mature disciples incorporate this holistic approach to Christian formation into their gatherings.

Is it possible to create opportunities for instruction, imitation, and immersion in the way of Jesus in a time of isolation and technology? Yes. What is true for Silicon Valley startups is true for the church: constraints drive innovation. Here are a few ways churches are adapting their ministry in response to the limitations brought on by the COVID-19 health crisis.

Discipleship as Instruction in a Time of Isolation and Technology

The internet was created to facilitate the transfer of information. Insofar as our church gatherings have been a means of delivering religious content, platforms such as Zoom, Facebook, and YouTube have proven to be useful and effective. Technology has allowed our congregations to “assemble” virtually for worship, instruction, and fellowship. However, the coronavirus has further exposed what we already knew to be true: that the American worship gathering has become a largely spectator experience in which people “consume” the spiritual goods and services that paid professionals have prepared. The online behaviors of Christians who have been disciplined in this way has been revealing. Church-hopping has given way to church-surfing, the practice of switching between one online service and another in rapid succession. Online Bible studies have given people a way to connect and study together, but it is not uncommon for participants to turn off their cameras and mute their microphones to hide the fact that they are doing other things or have walked out of the room entirely.

The pandemic has highlighted the spiritual paucity and impotency of an ecclesiology that makes few demands on believers to participate in the liturgy of worship. When one’s presence is not really needed (or even noticed), one’s attention span falls drastically and no meaningful discipleship can occur. Worship as spectacle has therefore translated poorly to an online world.

On the other hand, congregations that have been accustomed to participatory approach to worship are finding new ways for members to contribute to the edification of the body of Christ. Some churches have asked their people to help create the weekly liturgy by sharing testimonies, offering prayers, reading Scriptures, leading the congregation in worship, and even giving the weekly sermon. Pastors speak to the issues of the day and facilitate discussions about how the

⁶ The Holy Bible, *1 Corinthians 8:1 (NIV)*.

⁷ The Holy Bible, *James 1:27 (NIV)*.

people of God might live in an anxious and uncertain world. Online gatherings are not reduced to a one-way transfer of knowledge; rather, they become a dynamic, fluid conversation between the whole church family and God. Attendance and engagement in such churches have remained high because the people have a reason to be there; they are contributors, not consumers.

Discipleship as Imitation in a Time of Isolation and Technology

Much of human learning is acquired through imitation. As children, we learn to walk, talk, and eat by observing adults. In the same way, we learn to pray, worship, and serve by imitating our spiritual leaders. Jesus' disciples went everywhere He went, eating what He ate, serving whom He served, hoping to become like their rabbi in every way. The Apostle Paul said to the Corinthian believers, "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ."⁸

How do we imitate the faith of others when we cannot be together? In this season of isolation, churches that have a culture of public testimony and storytelling have been able to spotlight examples of Christlike devotion for others to follow. One pastor told stories of how congregants checked in on elderly neighbors and made sure they were stocked up on food and supplies. Another shared how she was donating her government stimulus check to immigrant families that were not eligible for aid. A few pastors have openly talked about their own struggle with loneliness, anxiety, and exhaustion during the pandemic and how Sabbath rest and self-care have helped them stay healthy. Stories like these give believers observable behaviors to imitate that foster spiritual growth in a time of isolation.

Discipleship as Immersion in a Time of Isolation and Technology

Immersive experiences like weekend retreats, service projects, and mission trips reinforce and expand our understanding of what it means to be a Christ follower. However, such activities are considered high-risk in the COVID-19 era and therefore out of bounds for churches. How do we approximate these kinds of encounters in time of isolation and technology?

What makes immersive experiences so powerful is that they remove us from what is familiar and activate the part of our brain associated with learning and discovery. Visiting new places, meeting new people, and trying new things stimulate our senses and create new memories. Facebook Live and Zoom are poor replacements for a world that was meant to be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched. Nevertheless, some interesting innovations have started to emerge.

Airbnb, a peer-to-peer online booking service that allows people to rent vacation properties on a short-term basis, has seen reservations plummet during the pandemic. In an effort to adapt their business model, Airbnb created "Online Experiences," an eclectic collection of travel activities led by virtual hosts in exotic places.⁹ Participants pay a fee to visit a bee farm in Portugal, cook authentic street tacos with a chef in Mexico, learn to draw Japanese manga with an instructor in Toyko, or take a ballet class with a dancer at the Sydney Opera House. Some churches have

⁸ The Holy Bible, *1 Corinthians 11:1*, NKJV.

⁹ Airbnb: Online Experiences. Retrieved June 23, 2020, from <https://www.airbnb.com/s/experiences/online>

experimented with similar innovations. One pastor taught his congregation how to make their own communion bread via Zoom, which they ate together during the Sunday online worship service. In the aftermath of George Floyd's death, some white congregations hosted online conversations with black pastors to help their people engage in issues of racial justice – a simulation of the kind of cross-cultural dialogue that might happen on an urban mission trip. One church conducted a virtual retreat in which attendees were sent a handmade prayer shawl, incense, and a catered meal to create an experience that included touch, smell, and taste.

There are many creative ways to provide immersive, sensory-rich discipleship experiences while reducing the risk of contagion. Hispanic congregations have embraced drive-in services where participants can see one another, sing at the top of their lungs from the safety of their cars, wave their hands, and honk their horns. A church in San Jose, CA set up a food distribution center and invited members to come help pack and deliver boxes to needy families. Another congregation in Watsonville, CA set up a socially distanced sewing shop in the church sanctuary. Women came together every morning to make facial coverings for first responders and homeless residents in their community. Some churches have organized self-guided prayer walks and drive-by celebrations for high school graduates. These are just a few of the ways churches are inviting people to get out of their homes and into their communities for service and mission in a safe, responsible manner.

Discipleship is not only about reorienting our minds but also about reorienting our character and whole selves in the way of Jesus. Faith must lead to action. Although there is no replacement for being physically together as the embodied church, it is possible to engage in meaningful spiritual formation in our present circumstance.

Holistic Discipleship Leads to a More Faithful and Fruitful Church

There will always be people that, for various reasons, are unable to physically gather with the body and for whom mediated presence through technology can be a viable method of discipleship and connection. The adaptive lessons learned through the pandemic can help us become a more resilient, distributed, and influential church. Since effective discipleship is concerned with the whole person and should therefore take into consideration what we know about human development, our gatherings – whether physical or virtual - should include opportunities for instruction, imitation, and immersion. A holistic understanding of discipleship is essential to our understanding of the church as an *ekklesia* – a people who gather to join in God's redemptive mission in and to the world.