

HIGHLIGHTS

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COVID-19 LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE PAST YEAR

Going Virtual
**Euroventure
'Redefined'**

Children's Ministry
**Turning Crisis
into Opportunity**

Learning from Times of Epidemics



by Tim Faulkner
General Secretary

With no end in sight, the devastation caused by the COVID-19 virus continues to wreak havoc on our world. It is indisputable that the virus is highly contagious and does not discriminate. We may never know the exact numbers, but we do know that men and women of all ages, and particularly those advanced in age or with medical conditions, have felt the impact. There has been a tremendous loss of life!

In times like these, followers of Jesus Christ shine even brighter as they lay down their lives for others in service to their Lord and Master. They are no less susceptible to the virus; in fact, many Christians have lost their lives. What has set them apart is their unflinching determination to love their neighbour and make disciples in a context of social distancing, mask wearing, and constant hand washing. As a result, although it is difficult to measure the numbers of people that are served, churches are growing. Prayer meeting attendance has risen. Small groups are being started “spontaneously.” And as loved ones have fallen to the virus, there is the solace of knowing that we who are in Christ will see each other again one day when we all stand before our Father in heaven. Christians find comfort in the face of death!



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Society at large is able to get a sense of a difference. Science may be able to explain what the virus is and provide a way to at least slow it down, but it falls short in providing resources to overcome fear. Christians go farther. They insist that life is meaningful and find solace in the God who reigns over creation. The amount of love demonstrated by Christians in the face of the epidemic is, in fact, a primary argument for the truth of Christianity.

If Cyprian had lived today his words may have sounded like the ones that I have written here. When his time arrived, the age of acts of the apostles was in the past and a multiplicity of elders or presbyters, bishops, and elders were leading the church. Subsequently there was the development of a single bishop to oversee the church in a given region. In AD 251 Cyprian was the Bishop of Carthage, and he provided spiritual guidance in the context of a virus that at its height killed 5,000 people in Rome in a single day. In his epistle entitled *On Mortality*, he writes:

“Although this mortality has contributed to nothing else, it has especially accomplished this for Christians and servants of God, that we have begun gladly to seek martyrdom while we are learning not to fear death. These are trying exercises for us, not deaths; they give to the mind the glory of fortitude; by contempt of death they prepare for a crown...” (quoted in Rodney Stark’s *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 81).

Even though Cyprian’s commitment to Christ eventually led to martyrdom, during the plague of the 3rd century he chose to exile for 14 months to direct his flock with pastoral epistles (*History of the Christian Church* by Philip Schaff, vol. II, p. 847). His epistles paint the picture of a church that is full of suffering and death like the rest of the world yet is responding differently and therefore providing a clear demonstration of the life of Christ in the lives of His disciples. Rodney Stark goes so far as to suggest “that had

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Plague hill in Germany with historical warning message to visitors.

classical society not been disrupted and demoralised by these catastrophes, Christianity might not have become so dominant a faith” (Stark, p. 74).

Fast forward to 2021 and the question of how to lead the church during and after the COVID-19 epidemic. As I speak with our leaders, I can hear the frustration. We are asking, “Can we be done with this already please?!” This is not offered as an affront to God’s sovereignty as much as an exclamation of exasperation. How much longer will this go on? What will life be like on the other side?

Church history is not alone in assisting us. When you consider the broad scope of Biblical history and the times that God’s people were obedient and courageous, it generally followed a time of preparation that was difficult. I expect no less from this current moment in history.

Through the latest epidemic, God is at work preparing His church. As you read the articles that follow, let me suggest some takeaways from which to pick:

- Disciple-making requires opportunities like these for engaging our neighbours.
- New times provide new ways for God’s people to rally together to edify the church.
- These times highlight how differently various age groups offer and expect to receive communication.
- “Hybrid church” has opened up the doors for people who have difficulties in traveling to meetings and getting off work in time to attend Bible studies and prayer meetings.

- Moving more content online helps us to be equipping churches and to creatively engage people in the membership process/discipleship pathway.
- A forced move away from normal services towards smaller discussion groups may cause the church to become closer relationally.
- “Hybrid church” continues to serve those who only want to do things in person.
- Decisions to meet in person necessitate robust communication, generous amounts of time spent in prayer, and God’s wisdom and grace as we navigate the laws laid down by authorities, our primary obedience to Christ over Caesar, and our commitment to love our neighbour and make disciples.

Thank you to the IBC pastors, leaders, and church members who have shared with me their experience at this time! We have a lot that we can learn from one another. Let me know how I might comfort and encourage you! We celebrate a God who is good and who has a plan that He wants to accomplish in and through us in times like these!

Note: I am grateful to my friend and seminary professor Dick Kantzer who pointed me to the historical lessons during the times of Cyprian and Dionysius and sent me some articles to read. I read further about that moment in church history in books by Latourette, Schaff, Shelley, and Stark.



Pastoring a Congregation Virtually



by Craig Harwood
Interim Pastor,
Multination Church,
Frankfurt, Germany

I've been serving as interim pastor of Multination Church, Frankfurt, Germany, since last July. When I was approached about doing a "virtual" interim in the middle of COVID-19 restrictions, we all had no idea this pandemic would go on as long as it has. Another thing I didn't realize was how well everyone would respond and engage over the internet. The experience has reminded me of a few prerequisites and taught me a few new things that are helpful to include as we incorporate these practices into our routines for the post-COVID long term.

April and I began this endeavor with a bit of concern over how well we would be able to engage with people we have never met – never engaged in person – and never shared any experiences with. We did have a few pre-conditions working in our favor.


The first is the significance of a common bond in Christ. Multination is a very diverse congregation. And it enriches my soul every time I experience Christ in the midst of such diversity. Our Lord and Savior binds us together as one and serves as the common thread through which we can build relationship. Yes, even over the internet! Prior to this experience, we didn't think it was possible to establish relationships with anyone without meeting them in

person. This experience has proven otherwise.

A second thought is that with such a globally diverse congregation, it is also significant that we have lived in Europe and Asia, therefore understanding and appreciating some of the differences from other cultures around the world. Living in other cultures has allowed us to hear, understand, and meet needs in ways that wouldn't have been possible if we only had exposure to one culture.

Also, over the years in my working life I conducted many meetings over video and had to learn the skills of building relationship and managing meetings over long distances and time zones.


Finally, the quality of interaction is also somewhat dependent on the quality of the internet and the internet tools you learn to use that facilitate larger group meetings. We were able to hold a quite effective two-day church conference because of Victoria Aleksandraviciene's facilitation skills and maneuvering through the use of tools to engage everyone.

This experience has been fulfilling and revealing as we have gained a love and appreciation for a community of believers on mission to fulfill the calling of Christ on their lives and their church. 



Euroventure 2021 "Redefined" Online

In the last year, everything changed. COVID-19 struck the world, masks and social distancing became the norm, and almost everything transitioned online. Since change seems to be our new normal, we've changed Euroventure 2021 to an online event. Join us for this new weekend event from 9-11 July as we explore Euroventure "Redefined"!

Information regarding camp this year, how your church can host a watch party for the youth, and how we can make an online event as personal as possible can be found soon on our website: www.ibc-churches.org/youth. Make plans to attend as we celebrate Euroventure "Redefined"! 

Taylor Whitley

Turning Crisis into Opportunity in Children's Ministry



by Susana Kornahrens, Director
of Children's Ministries
International Baptist Church,
Stuttgart, Germany

We are living in a unique time in history with a pandemic and lockdowns. Something none of us have ever experienced. Despite the uncertainties, the Psalmist assures us that God is our help and our shield, therefore, we rejoice and trust in His Holy Name: *We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. May your unfailing love be with us, Lord, even as we put our hope in you (Psalm 33:20-22).*

God can turn crisis into opportunities; we only need to put our hope in Him. Like many churches, we seek God's face on how to move forward in our children's ministry.

A resource that has been particular helpful is *Resilient: Child Discipleship and the Fearless Future of the Church* by Valerie Bell and Awana Clubs International. It focuses on three key areas, which are essential for shaping long-term faith:

- **Belonging:** Highly relational ministry led by a loving and caring adult
- **Believing:** Deeply Scriptural ministry rooted in the truth of God's Word and the power of the gospel
- **Becoming:** Experiential ministry, designed to move kids from simulation to real-world application of faith-based living

"Belong, Believe and Become is the foundation for spiritual resilience. From child to child, the environments and circumstances can change; but when these components are present, the probability for fruitful, long-term discipleship increases – even in the face of adverse conditions" (page 167).

International Baptist Church Stuttgart's children's ministry team reflected on how to apply these foundations to our Sunday School and Awana programs. These are highlighted below.



Ineza proudly wears her Awana vest.



1. BELONGING

In Mark 10:14, Jesus says, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” Our goal each week was, and still is, to welcome children as Jesus welcomes them, whether online or in person – with love and a sense of belonging. We call each child by name during activities and offer specific prayers for each child. First-timers receive a gift to let them know we are happy to have them. Birthday celebrants receive a small gift to let them know how special they are. When children move or relocate to other countries, they receive a small farewell gift to let them know they will be missed.

Since it was impossible to host all children in on-site Sunday School during our 9:30 and 11:30 services, we offered a parallel online Sunday School service from 10:00-10:45. The goal was that no one would be left out. Challenges with technology and slow internet connections did not hold us back. We persisted in our attempts to seek ways to connect with families. We are still seeking new ideas on how to make our children feel welcome. We are continually evaluating our effectiveness in the area of using technology to connect with our children. Ultimately, our desire is that all children feel connected by experiencing a sense of belonging. Our goal is they will truly know that they are individually loved by God and us, their leaders.

We moved our Awana program to Zoom as well. In order for each child to have individual time with their leader, each leader is assigned three children. Each child has a 10-minute, one-on-one time with his/her leader to ensure that each one has the opportunity to recite Bible verses from memory. It is also a time to follow-up and pray. Children also study the Bible for 30 minutes in a large group class. These

were highly anticipated, and both children and leaders looked forward to it. The small, intimate groups fostered a sense of BELONGING.

2. BELIEVING

Despite not holding Kingdom Kids during the lockdown from March 17 until the end of April, we provided families with devotional resource links to help parents lead their children in worshipping God, studying His Word, and knowing more about Jesus. Here’s the timeline:

02 May 2020

- Started our online Saturday Kingdom Kids which continued until mid-July
- Maximum of 25 kids who participated: Preschool, Grade 1-3, and Grade 4-6
- Consisted of three small groups

19 July 2020

- Resumed our in-person Kingdom Kids Sunday School for 9:30 & 11:30 services
- Hosted a mixed group (Preschool and Elementary)
- Capacity of 30 kids per service

August 2020

- Launched VBS@Home and provided materials such as Bible lesson videos, PowerPoint presentations, and craft supplies.
- Five families participated

During the lockdown from March through June

- In our Awana Sunday Program 2019-2020, clubs continued using an online one-on-one platform to recite memory verses in order to finish their books.

- Instead of the awards night ceremony in May, the year-end awards were given individually.

25 October 2020

- Our Awana Sunday Program 2020-2021 kicked off online
- Clubs or Groups
 - Cubbies (3-4 year olds)
 - Sparks (K5-Grade 2)
 - Truth & Training -T&T (Grade 3-6)
 - Trek (Grade 7-9)
 - Journey (Grade 10-12)
- There were 60 children/youth registered with 15 leaders.
- Each club has a large group Bible Study for 30 minutes followed by calls from leader assigned to 3 children to serve as mentor for the complete Awana year.

Here's what Mrs. Lindsey (mom of a first-grader Sparky) said about Awana:

"My son loves the accomplishment he feels reciting the Bible verse he has memorized to his leader. He works hard on this each week and is proud to show what he has learned."

To foster a love to recite God's word, to know it, and to share it – is our prayer for everyone we teach. Mrs. Sharlene, (our T&T Director and mom of T&Ters - Grade 5 & Grade 6) describes how Awana has helped her children grow in Christ:

"Awana has provided my family the opportunity to study and learn more about God and His Word in a dynamic way. Through large group lessons, small group studies, and Scripture memorization, Awana is instilling biblical principles into the lives of our children. It has been a blessing to be able to continue our journey in Awana, albeit, virtually during the pandemic. Regardless of the many uncertainties that are currently flooding our daily lives, taking time to focus on developing a deeper understanding and relationship with God has brought us a sense of stability, purpose, and peace."

Asked how it supports the children in their spiritual journey, she replied:

"God is the center of our lives. Through our daily prayers, studying the Bible, attending church, participating in Awana, and listening to Christian music, we strive to grow our relationship with God as a family. I believe it is equally important to not only learn about God and what is written in the Bible but also to demonstrate how to apply the Word in our daily lives. As a mother, I attempt to be a positive role model for my children and when I fail, which can be often at times, I admit my faults and ask for forgiveness. While each of us must individually choose to follow God, it is our responsibility to teach our children about God as it is written in the Bible: "Fathers,

do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord' (Ephesians 6:4)."

3. BECOMING

Our prayer is God will use our ministry to mold children not only to believe and belong, but also to BECOME like Christ. Spiritual formation is a life-long process. It takes daily routines to enforce faith in family. One Awana mom, Mrs. Lindsey happily reports:

"As a parent I try to make faith a part of everyday life. We regularly pray, have worship music playing in our home, and talk about what we are thankful for and where we saw God working in our day. In our home we start every morning with a Bible story from either our Awana handbook or The Beginners Bible for children while we eat breakfast. This helps us to start the day on a positive note with our minds focused on the Word before we head off to school and work!"


Another Awana mom, Mrs. Claudine describes the spiritual journey of her Sparky-Grade 1 daughter as follows:

"IBC helped Ineza a lot to grow in her faith by teaching her different Bible stories. From them, she got to know who Jesus is, who God is, and how to behave like a child who knows Jesus/God. She is such a good girl, and her knowledge about the Bible is helping her to be so. As her parents, we encourage her to love Jesus more by reading her Bible at home, praying together every day, and loving others. We try to model how believers behave in everyday life for her."

We are filled with joy to hear how our programs and materials are incorporated in the daily routines of our children's lives.

This ministry requires that we teach beyond words. When asked to identify the most dedicated, modern-day disciple of Jesus they have ever heard, a teen student responded, *"Mr. Kingsley (our Sparks Director) because he is very kind to everyone and very faithful in serving God."*

Our love and commitment to the good works God designed for us to accomplish speaks volumes regarding our faith. Our impact goes beyond the classroom and can change lives.

Despite the difficult circumstances caused by this epidemic last year and up to the current day, God continues to use this ministry mightily. Come join us now in the children's ministry! The next generation is greatly in need of passionate leaders. Our greatest joy in children's ministry is to see both children and adult leaders flourishing in their journey of faith and to know the feeling of: BELONGING, BELIEVING, and BECOMING lifelong lovers and servants of God. 



A Year with Zoom



by Nick Howard, Pastor
Immanuel Baptist Church,
Wiesbaden, Germany

This Sunday, it will have been a year since we started meeting online. We never planned on that being the case, and several times along the way, we have considered going back, but other than meeting twice in an outdoor setting, it has been a solid year of meeting on Zoom.

It might be helpful to know why we made that decision, since under other circumstances, I think we might well have chosen a slightly different path. As far as I know, Immanuel is the only church in the IBC to co-own their building, together with a national church. It is a unique situation which works surprisingly well. In addition, we have a Romanian church which has been renting space from us for the last several years. The wonderful thing is that (normally) the space is always being used for Kingdom purposes. But it also reduces the flexibility on when we can meet. Our normal time for worship on Sundays is 12:30, after the German congregation meets and before the Romanian congregation has their service. This also works surprisingly well, even though it is obviously the time when many people would be having their mid-day meal. It is hardest on the younger children, but with all the activity on Sundays, most kids are fine.

As the pandemic hit and we moved online, we made the decision to move our service time to 11:00. While the 12:30 time works when you are doing in-person worship, it is certainly not an ideal time for an online service, especially for smaller kids, who are now wondering why they are home, but lunch must wait.

Ultimately, this became one of the key reasons we remained online. To return to the building, meant returning to the 12:30 time slot. Not only that, but any return, while bearable for adults, would be extremely challenging. There could be no singing and no children's program or Sunday School. Social distancing was required, and a seating plan was in place that often would not allow for entire families to sit together (Because we had three congregations, a set seating plan with pairs of seats distanced from one another was decided upon).

Still, we might have given it more consideration, had we not discovered some things which made our online worship a significantly more attractive option. In these last 12 months, we have continued

to grow – even as we have continued to see people transition away from Wiesbaden. We even have those who are not yet believers find us online and begin to attend the services on a regular basis. They ask questions and have even connected beyond the worship service.

When I consider the reasons why it has worked well for us, I think the best answer I can give is that we have tried very hard to create an atmosphere which helps people connect with what is happening. They are not just observers, but participants.

This may seem a bit counter-intuitive when you find out we use the Zoom Webinar format, which means that only those who are leading the service can be seen and heard, but we work hard to interact with those attending in a personal

way. So, for instance, we have a kid's time in which we might have a live kid's sermon or show a music video where we encourage the kids to dance with those on the video. In our prayer time, those attending are encouraged to post prayer requests and praises in the chat window. We greet one another via chat as people arrive. The music used is not just the YouTube version of songs, but our own praise team who we recorded singing the songs. We have done the Lord's Supper on a regular basis and even had a baptism – recorded in advance and then shown on Sunday. We rotate those who participate in the service so that it isn't always the same people who are seen. We use polls and the chat window so that people can interact, even in the message.

As Germany has spent a good portion of the last several months in a fairly tight lockdown, almost everything has moved onto Zoom, including men's and women's ministries, weekly Bible study and even a 21 Days of Prayer emphasis during which we had prayer meetings three times a day. All in all, God has used this gift of technology to minister not only to our church, but to our community and even people around the world who have joined us. That doesn't mean we don't look forward to being together in person, but when we do, we plan on bringing Zoom back with us. We could never have imagined living life together on Zoom, now we can't imagine life without it.



COVID Blessings



by Nathanael Fawcett,
Pastor
Calvary International
Church, Sao Paulo, Brazil

A year and one week ago I was sitting in my hotel room in Dubrovnik, Croatia, talking to a Lufthansa agent on the phone, trying to find a way to get home to Brazil on a flight several days earlier than I had planned. I had awakened that morning to the news that then-President Donald Trump had closed U.S. borders to most entries from Europe, and our planned MLC was falling apart. Guest speakers and volunteers had decided it would be unwise to participate given the uncertain travel conditions, and many IBC members who had registered for the MLC likewise thought better of traveling in a time of such unprecedented global upheaval.

A year ago...that thought still shocks me. I thought – we all thought – this would have been over in a matter of weeks, maybe months at most. And yet here we are. Brazil is facing the worst of the pandemic with death rates shooting up and infection rates higher than ever. As a church we had been meeting in person since 20 September 2020,

And some of those losses did occur. But what overwhelmed me was the generosity that welled up in our community. In this time of tragedy and uncertainty, God moved in the hearts of many of our members to give generously to help meet the needs of others.

We did not ask for money – we did not need to. Our benevolence fund grew beyond what it had ever been before, and we were given the joy of meeting many financial needs of our people through the sacrificial giving of others. This whole year has felt to me like Acts 4:32-37, where Luke states that the fledgling church provided for her own people, so that “there were no needy persons among them.” Now I am certain that there are still unmet needs in our congregation of which I am unaware, but the generosity of Christians to their sisters and brothers has humbled me and challenged me and encouraged me beyond what I can express. Praise God for His Church!

The second blessing involves our Advent celebration. In December of 2019, the leader of our worship ministry introduced me to the work of recording artist Andrew Peterson. The album that was specifically brought to my attention was Peterson’s “Behold the Lamb of God” – a work similar to a musical in that the songs begin in the Old Testament and work their way through redemption history up to the birth of Christ. Peterson has shared that he was inspired to write these songs more than 20 years ago when he attended a Christmas concert of a well-known, high-profile Christian artist. During the entire two-hour concert, the name of Jesus was not mentioned, either in word or song. In reaction and response, Peterson decided to write a musical history of the incarnation to which Santa Claus would not be invited and the focus would be on Jesus Christ himself.

In early 2020 Josh (our worship ministry leader) and I had brainstormed and dreamed about the possibility of our worship team preparing and then performing “Behold the Lamb of God.” Once the pandemic began to restrict us, however, I lost hope that we would be able to pull it off in a meaningful way. I am grateful until today that Josh thought differently. His perspective was that the church needed something special, specifically because of all the limitations and suffering caused by COVID. Beginning in October, our worship team began staying after each morning service to have lunch together, rehearse, and prepare “Behold the Lamb of God.” This was a challenge as we navigated masks, social distancing,

and now due to new government restrictions we are once again reverting to streaming-only services. It certainly does not feel like progress, but like heavy regress to a less full, less joyful time. But even as I mourn the renewed physical separation between members of our church body, God consistently reminds me of two profound “COVID blessings” we have experienced during this pandemic – and these are cause for celebration!

As COVID-19 ramped up in March of 2020, I (along with many of you, I’m sure) was concerned about church finances – and not just about the budget, but about those in our body who would lose income or even jobs due to restrictions and cut-backs.





and eating together while respecting and being zealous for each other's health and protection. But the results continue to bring blessing.

Because we were limited in our seating capacity, we scheduled two performances – for a Saturday night and Sunday night. Both nights quickly “sold” out, with many people who do not attend our church signing up eagerly, just for a chance to celebrate Jesus in the middle of so much global gloom. And while our team is far from professional, God has blessed us with some gifted musicians who also understand worship...and the results were fantastic. Of course, there were some off-key notes (I myself contributed quite a number), some missed cues, and some forgotten lyrics, but overall the music was a blessing to those who came and those who performed. In fact, our worship team is more cohesive and loving toward each other now than they have ever been in the past, and this is due in large

part to working together to put on this celebration. Shortly after the second performance, Nicolas, one of our drummers, asked, “So what are we doing for Easter?”

I don't share any of this to brag...I am fully aware that neither of these blessings were due to me or my planning. They came about by the Spirit of God working in and through people who believe in Jesus and are sons and daughters of the Heavenly Father. I am also aware that many of you have had very different experiences of COVID and its toll on you and your church. But what still leaves me in awe is God's freedom to bless His church in surprising ways, even when the world seems to conspire against Him and against us. I know I am not alone in this. I am grateful to have had this opportunity to share some “COVID blessings,” and I hope you will remember and share yours as well.



When Challenges and Difficulties Become a Blessing

It's been just more than a year since the pandemic, but somehow it feels much longer than that. Why? Why is it for others it feels so fast that they barely noticed that time passed by?

As we face everyday challenges and struggles, with things that seem so difficult and impossible to get through, a day feels like a month and a month feels like a year. But when we are in a holiday, when we take our time to rest and enjoy our freedom from all the loads of life, time flies!

Difficult to compare, to contrast and yet it is what it is. Individuals have their own way with how to deal with their daily living, but one thing for sure is that we can always plan what we want for tomorrow but God's purpose will always stand. As Proverbs 19:21 says: “Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails.”

As an individual who loves to travel, an outdoor person, a person who loves to communicate and be with people, this pandemic

affects my day-to-day living. Such a big adjustment and a challenge to be able to function in this that they call the “new normal.”

Putting aside all the complains that are truly not needed, we are thankful that God has blessed and continually blesses us with many things, big and small. We are thankful for more quiet time to study His word, thankful for good health and peace, and thankful for having much more time to spend with the family that we appreciate more now than before. We also feel much closer to our families and friends abroad (through Zoom, Skype, and other means of social media) whom we haven't communicated with for years. It is because we have more time now to spend with our families and friends because of travel restrictions. What we learned and hope to do in the future is to see that in difficulties and challenges there is always a blessing!



Menchie Bolk

Choosing Joy



Image by Gerd Altmann from Pixabay


This article first appeared in FAITH LIFE, Volume 2, Issue 1, a ministry of Faith Baptist Church, Kaiserslautern, Germany. Used with permission.

A few days after the announcement of the second lockdown in Germany, I shared my disappointment with Pastor Garrett Starr (Faith Baptist Church, Kaiserslautern, Germany) about not being able to gather for a Christmas Eve service. He responded with mutual frustration over how our lives have been upended in 2020, but then posed a question for me to consider: “How do we give thanks to the LORD in the midst of the challenges we have faced in the body of Christ since COVID-19 hit in early spring?” My thoughts immediately turned to a year filled with canceled visitors, vacations, church activities, sports, and more. But as I continued re-playing 2020 in my mind, glimpses of God showing up and showing off with blessing upon blessing took over. I offer the following reflections for you to consider as you re-visit the year 2020.

As the year 2020 came to an end, I doubt there were many who lamented its passing. People all around the globe have been affected and/or infected with the COVID-19 virus which has crippled health-care systems, overworked essential staff, caused economic strains, separated family and friends, and disrupted everyday life for months on end. And yet, as Christians, we are told in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18: “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” How is this possible in the midst of the challenges we have faced in 2020?

First, Paul tells us to be joyful always. This seems counterintuitive when facing challenges so it must depend on our definition of joy. I believe joy is less an emotion and more an inner contentment – a trust that God is always in control. When we accept God’s sovereignty, we can more easily accept what is going on around us, even a global pandemic. God is not surprised by what is happening and, in fact, has purposed it for His plan. We begin to give thanks when we believe “that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). Choosing joy, in spite of our circumstances, is paramount to a life filled with the peace of God.

Second, we are told to pray continually. Prayer turns attention to our Creator, Provider, and Almighty God. Both the Old and New Testaments are filled with prayers of praise, worship, and pleadings of God’s people. In Matthew 6:8b, Jesus said, “Your Father knows what you need before you ask him,” and then He taught us how to pray. Prayer is active communication with God that expresses worship, praise, and dependence on Him for all things all the time. With our heart and mind focused on God’s will, we are better prepared to face difficulties.

Next, as we give thanks in all circumstances, we are acknowledging God’s work in all things. The chorus from one of my favorite hymns tells us to “count your many blessings name them one by one and it will surprise you what the LORD hath done.” In the current atmosphere it is easy to become discouraged, but rather than focusing on the things we have missed such as graduations, weddings, or travel, we need to focus on our blessings. Did I wake up in a warm bed and feed my family today? Do I have technology that connects me with friends locally and family far away? Am I free to gather with other believers without fear of persecution? I am not diminishing the pain, frustration, or loss anyone experienced in 2020. I simply offer a challenge to change our way of viewing our lives so that Christ is honored and so we may find our joy in Him. 

Rose Waschek



Persevering in Jesus Christ

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This past year, 2020, was the year of explosive changes that have wounded many of our souls. Humanity awaited the strike of midnight between 31 December and 1 January. Somehow, we tricked ourselves into believing that this simple second forward in time would allow us a clean slate and perhaps we could leave everything bad in the year that was now behind us.

How lovely if we could leave behind COVID, political corruption, and divisive ideologies. I wish we could turn the page to 2021, and 2020 would feel like a distant memory. Yet, we know, a mere second doesn't do much in the way of actual change. If we are truly honest with ourselves, these deep chasms and wounds in our world do not heal with the stroke of a clock.

As believers moved forward into the new year, I believe God extended to us a gracious lesson in experiencing 2020. He began more forcefully forging an endurance in us where we could move into 2021 knowing it may not get any better, yet we still hope in Him. Where many have their hopes placed in a calendar date, we are being built up to withstand hardships that are promised to us in the faith. His discipline is at work (Hebrews 12:11).

We have watched the world shift drastically in such a short period of time, and it has shaken things from our lives that we have held onto as comforts other than Christ. Whereas Americans have felt sure in their constitutional rights, whereas humanity has felt safe from massive outbreaks of illness and death, whereas people have assumed there is more

good than evil in this world, we have seen quite the opposite. Many of us have assumed our strong and happy friends were doing well only to have gotten phone calls of their demise because they could not stand up under the weight of this year and all it has brought upon them. I believe it's His grace that has allowed these things to be shaken loose so that we learn to stand firm on Him and to be reminded we are not citizens of this world. Our heavenly home still awaits us.

Another gracious gift the Lord has provided us with is time. With so many things closed, gatherings being canceled, even medical needs being postponed, I have had a lot of time on my hands. It has been a lonely year, but those of us from countries where freedom of religion is taken for granted might have actually realized how wonderful and fragile of a gift that truly is for the first time. While so many brothers and sisters in Christ have been suffering for ages because of their faith in Jesus, we are now just glimpsing the potential suffering for our faith on our own shores.

As I originally wrote this, I had just embarked on the book of Isaiah in my "Bible in a Year" plan. The designers have carefully strategized what books we read when. It was timed well for the season of Christmas as it is a time to celebrate the One we worship. My brothers and sisters, let us grab ahold of Jesus and be strengthened in His promises:

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of darkness, on them has light shone. ... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this" (Isaiah 2:6-7, ESV).

Where human words fail, God's Word is alive and breathes hope into our souls. Continue to press forward holding tight to His garments. He is in sight, and He is coming again. Pray for your church. May God bless you as we step forward together and persevere in Jesus Christ.

Savannah Rae Perry



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Getting Used to Disappointment

In the classic and quotable movie *The Princess Bride*, the hero of the story Wesley says, “Get used to disappointment.” When the pandemic reached Costa Rica the second week of March a year ago, and as one thing after another was canceled, the line from that movie continued to reverberate in my mind over and over again.

“Get used to disappointment.” Our in-person services were canceled, and we started to do our services online. All our activities and small groups that met at the church or at a home were canceled or shifted to online. Restaurants, movie theaters, concerts, and athletic events were all canceled. To say the least, it was a very disappointing time.

It has been just over a year now, and by God’s grace, things in Costa Rica have slowly started to open up again. By God’s grace, we have been able to minister during this time, and we have learned a few things.

International Baptist Church, San Jose, Costa Rica, was able to make many adjustments and adaptations, and we were able to continue to be the church in the midst of this pandemic. Here are some of the highlights of what we were able to do during the pandemic.

- Online worship service – We were able to develop a creative online service that engaged many of our people. We are blessed with a very organized worship leader and a videographer in our church. Various leaders collaborated to put together a nice service that included songs from different people from their homes. We had many other elements in the service as well, and we broadcasted the service every Sunday morning at 10:00 on our website and Facebook. We tried to make this broadcast interactive, and we did have a solid number of people attend either the live broadcast or view the recorded broadcast.
- Online groups – We were able to move all of our groups online. We made sure that all of our groups from children to adults were able to continue online. This meant some training and purchasing more Zoom accounts, but within about three weeks after the shut down we had all of our classes meeting online.
- Food distribution – The economic impact of the shut down which included border restrictions was tremendous, especially on the poor. We went from an 8-10% unemployment rate before the pandemic to an unemployment rate of almost 25%. In re-

sponse to this we began a food distribution program. First, it was every two weeks, and then we moved it to once a month. People in need could line up outside of the church, and we then offered them a bag of basic food items. We had many people donate to this, and we had a wonderful team of volunteers who distributed the food. We also shared the gospel to those waiting in line and had several professions of faith recorded. We have distributed almost 2,500 bags of food during the pandemic.

- Contacts – One of our great challenges was trying to stay in touch with everyone, especially since we were not meeting physically. We were able to assign our members and attenders to some of our key leaders to contact during the shut down, and this went very well.
- Giving – We had already set up ways for people to give locally through our banks and in the U.S. through IBCM before the pandemic hit. This was a really helpful tool for us during the six months we were unable to meet in person. Our giving and finances remained solid, and we were able to continue to meet all of our needs. We even did some much-needed internal renovations and updated a lot of our technology while our building was closed.




In October we were able to return to in-person services following strict protocols. Even trying to make sure what the protocols were and how to follow them was a challenge. However, in the end, we were able to put together a plan that we felt was workable, and we returned to in-person services. We continued to broadcast our services which was something we were doing before the pandemic.

Before the pandemic we averaged approximately 500 people in two services and had children's and adult classes going on at the same time. When we returned, we only offered one service, and we had no classes available for children. We also were dealing with weekend driving restrictions that impacted us. For our first three months we offered just one service with around 100 people. This schedule continued in the months of January and February of this year. We slowly began to see more people returning as the country opened up and as COVID cases went down. The government said churches could only function at half capacity. This meant 160 people in our auditorium with a place for overflow. Fortunately, the last Sunday we had one service, we were nearly at capacity. In March we moved to two services with some classes and some childcare, and we are seeing more and more people return. We are now trying to become a hybrid church. Most of our groups still meet online though a few do in person and online meetings. We feel this will continue for the foreseeable future.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED?

In all honesty, I do not know that we have completely processed all of our learnings. Without a doubt, we have seen the faithfulness of God over the last year. We have learned we can do the main tasks of the church without meeting in-person. Yet, we also have learned how critically important getting together in person can be. We do know that for the foreseeable future we will have to be a hybrid church, allowing people to choose whether to meet in person or to just join an activity through the internet. And we have learned that it is possible to make disciples and to reach people doing everything online. We have seen a number of new people join us as we have returned, who only discovered us online during this pandemic. This has been exciting.

This pandemic has taken a toll on everyone. Some of our families, including missionaries, have decided it was time to return home because of the pandemic. At the same time, we seem to be slowly seeing a new wave of expats entering the country as a result of the pandemic. What we will continue to be is an English-speaking church trying to reach and disciple our target audience. We have been reminded in a very powerful way that Jesus said, "I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). 

Paul Dreessen



Portimao, Portugal

THE INTERNATIONAL Christian Fellowship Baptist Church, Portimao, Portugal, continues to hold our church services online. Although we all naturally miss the face-to-face conversations, the online services allow our church to maintain fellowship all year long with those who normally visit us during the year for just a week or two. Because of this, our congregation has grown dramatically from a small group of 25-30 to approximately 200! Each week we have people from different parts of the world reading and praying in the services, so we really are a very international church. At our Christmas Carol service, we had people taking part from Australia, Russia, Canada, U.S., Holland, Portugal, England, and Wales. Even our grandchildren in Canada have been taking part in our services each week through Bible story videos which their dad has made and the children have acted in. God is so good to us and sends us many blessings in spite of the difficulties that we are all facing at this time.

At Christmas, our church normally pre-

pare gift boxes for local children in need. Because of the restrictions of the pandemic, this year people gave money for gift vouchers instead. We were able to provide 10€ vouchers for 72 local children in need as well as send an extra 235€ to a children's home in Lesotho.

In this time of lockdown in Portugal, our soup kitchen is seeing record numbers of people coming for food with 60-70 people arriving for take-away meals three times per week (Sundays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays). A local supermarket is giving us food that has reached its sell-by date, and with the help of a great team of volunteers, we are able to serve a hot meal on two of those days and soup and sandwiches on the other day. The owner of a local restaurant has volunteered his services and comes over on Thursdays to serve a hot meal that he has prepared. All those who come for food – as well as the helpers – have to follow the protocol in place with sanitizing their hands and wearing masks. The people are most grateful for everything that they receive.



At Christmas, in addition to their bag of hot food and Bible tract, the people also received a gift bag with a Gospel of Luke, pen with a Bible verse, towel, shower gel, and chocolate. Needless to say, they were delighted!

Joy Borgan

Darmstadt, Germany

IN OCTOBER 2019, a few months before COVID-19 was even on the news, Converge International Fellowship's founding pastor had moved back to the U.S. and an interim who we expected to stay for a few months had arrived. Thankfully, the pastor couple were given a year-long visa to stay, otherwise when March 2020 came along, we probably would have been without a pastor and with not much chance of one being able to come. We are thankful that they were also able to stay for much of 2020, helping us as a church through the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown. In November 2020, through God's guidance, we did find another interim to get us through the next lockdown in Germany.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative influence on our lives, we have also seen some incredible opportunities for ministry within the church and outreach to the community. Before lockdown occurred we were doing very little on-line. We had had one growth group which had met in a hybrid mode in 2019 just because of the distance people would have to travel

on a winter's evening. Even then though, the focus was mostly on the people in the room and not on those on-line. When the lockdown hit in March of 2020, we were quick to move everything on-line. There were some initial reservations from some people, but even they were impressed with how well it worked. Through the on-line groups and services we were often able to reach out to people who would not have the opportunity otherwise to attend.

Moreover, there were opportunities to reach out to the community of Darmstadt. With lockdown in full force, an organization feeding the homeless around the main train station in Darmstadt could no longer provide that service. Working together with another church in the area, CIF was able to step in to provide a ministry to cook meals and distribute them to the homeless. In the few months that we have been doing this, relationships with the homeless are being built up and opportunities to witness to the people are developing.

During lockdown, we could no longer meet in the church building we rented or

use their baptistry as the German church had turned the sanctuary almost into a television studio for their on-line service. The sound and light systems in the baptistry would not have dealt with water very well, although it might have been an electrifying baptism. Instead we moved the baptism into the open. As the sun was setting over a local lake, we gathered to celebrate the baptism of three people from our congregation. But, one other also responded like the Ethiopian eunuch – "Here is water what is to stop me being baptized?" It was a celebration that the church may never have experienced if we had not been in lockdown.

Now, we have found our new pastor and COVID-19 is still causing problems. We pray that travel restriction between South Africa and Germany will soon be removed so that Pastor Chris Horn and his family will be able fly to Germany soon to minister in the next phase in the life of Converge International Fellowship, Darmstadt.

Stewart Maxwell

Hoensbroek, The Netherlands



STAND FIRM AND KEEP ON GOING...

“I am glad.” “I feel blessed.” “I can share my prayer concerns and blessings in this group.” “I learn a lot and wanting more to know God’s Word.” These are just some of the many encouraging words we hear from our weekly women’s Bible study at Emmanuel Baptist Church, Hoensbroek, The Netherlands. How good it is indeed to know that we all can find comfort, joy, and peace in God’s Word.

We are thankful and grateful that in spite of the pandemic God provides us all the means and ways to be able to continue to meet and study His Word. Social distancing and various restrictions because of pandemic did not stop us but rather

helps us to keep on going.

For more than 10 years, God has and is always faithful to continue and bring women to be part of this group. Women come and go for various reasons: some need to move because of job assignments, some need to be back to their country of origin, and some for various reasons.

In September last year, we started a new session using the study “Return to Jerusalem” (From Genesis to Major Prophets and Minor Prophets), one of the many Bible studies offered by Community Bible Study (CBS-Europe). Ana Lubascher, an EBC member who also works with CBS, hosts our study group via Zoom. We have 13 women in our group who join us

(from different parts of the world – Bahrain, Hawaii, Germany, Belgium, and The Netherlands), and we meet every Tuesday morning.

It is challenging to most of the young mothers in our group to be able to attend every week, knowing that they have children at home to tend to and help with their home studies. Yet with God’s help and their willingness to know more of God’s Word, they manage to be present week after week.

We are halfway through our Bible study, and we have learned that it is so important to stand firm and continue going on what God has planned for us. Pandemic or no pandemic – we need to strive to keep on going; studying His Word and applying it in our everyday lives; sharing it with our families, friends, and neighbors; and continuing to live in God’s plan, in His way, and in His truth.

Hopefully we will be finished with our study by June, and God willing, we can then start another study and continue in its present format (using Zoom) to be able to include women from other countries who want to join us.

Menchie Bolk

Bratislava, Slovakia

GERHARD VENTER, pastor of Bratislava Faith Community, Slovakia, is a real handyman and loves the challenge of making things. So, when Slovak regulations required preaching in a mask or having a separation, Gerhard got to work. He designed and built a home-made window of perspex with a wooden frame. This allowed him to preach without a mask, yet protect the few “helpers” needed for the service.

This particular message was prior to the baptism of Martin, a registered blind man who had come to faith, and streamed on YouTube. The baptismal pool was set up in the entrance lobby. It was too cold on the lawn outside – the usual location. We could not have done this had the congregation been present as it partially blocked the door.

During the pandemic, we started broadcasting on Zoom, then went to YouTube,

but we are now back on Zoom because we like the interaction that Zoom allows. Currently we have attracted former members from Greece, and family members from U.K., South Africa, Philippines, and Indonesia. This pandemic is certainly giving opportunity that we would not normally have and hence my next question.

One of the things we would value from a bigger church with real techies is what is the basic kit that is needed to make a better professional job of broadcasting our message, as well as some basic guidelines on how to use the new technology. Is it possible for a techie in one of the churches to write such an article and put it in the magazine? I am sure we are not the only church who would value this. A few examples of best buys would also help.

Pete Miller

