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THE KINGDOM EXTENSION NEWSLETTER OF THE EC CHURCH

## PUSHED BY THE PANDEMIC—FOR GOOD

A year ago we had no idea the upheaval 2020 would bring to our lives and our churches. As lockdowns cancelled our regularly scheduled programming and pushed us into new digital spaces, we learned on the fly and did the best we could with “the new normal.” But wishing for a return to the old normal in 2021 isn’t what our churches or God’s Kingdom need. Instead of seeing 2020 as a temporary change, three Fresh Expressions authors encourage us to let the pandemic change our ministries for good—and for the good of our neighbors, our churches and the Kingdom of God.

### 1 Making Sense of the Chaos

by Ann Marie Carley, October 19, 2020

#### The Let’s Go Back to Egypt Committee

In my faith tradition, fall is the time that congregations and pastors make a decision to continue in ministry together or begin to search for something different. I know many colleagues who feel like Moses and Aaron as the Israelites told them in Numbers 14:4 “we should pick a new leader and go back to Egypt.” They are serving in churches that seem to be unhappy with anything they do. They are stretching themselves thin and trying to make everyone safe and happy at the same time. The concept sounds nice, but it is simply not possible in real life.

#### The Reality

The pandemic which has swept across our nation has uncovered a harsh reality for most established churches. A reality that may have been known before these events, but was rarely discussed or accurately understood. A reality that includes the fact that weekly worship attendance has been on the decline for decades. ... A reality that shows our churches are just as divided as our culture. ...

It seems as though many are shell shocked by these realities as we begin to re-engage worship within the walls of our buildings again.

#### How Reality Went from Untraceable to Totally Uncovered

What I have come to realize is this, it is easy to ignore reality when you are in a space that feels safe and comfortable. ... **It was easier to remember the good old days when they were able to gather for meals and study in a space that had been built by them than to see how what they had been doing for decades no longer produced the same results.** ... It was easier to avoid conversation which may bring about conflict than to discuss things in a safe way that would allow everyone to grow.

As churches re-enter their buildings, things seem less safe and it is much harder to ignore reality. There is no way

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to not see the roped off pews or the empty seats. Those coming to worship onsite can look around and see “everyone” is not there. There is no way to safely engage in all of the activities from the good old days, making it painfully obvious that if new ways of connecting with people are not determined, the current generation occupying the space within the church may be the last. A quick scroll through social media uncovers the fact that even decisions churches have made in regards to worship have found us divided.

### How to Fill up Your Tank for Future Ministry

If I had a dollar for every time I have heard, “I can’t wait till we get back to normal” I wouldn’t need to worry about how to fund ministry in the coming year. **The problem with that statement within churches is that the “normal” people most often want to get back to did not even exist in January of 2020. It is a normal they are remembering from the middle of the last century.** It seems as though the church has idolized the past for so

long that they have been unwilling to look at their present reality or even dream of a future that may be different.

This is the same problem Moses and Aaron faced with the Israelites. The Israelites wanted to turn around and go back to Egypt. They were tired. They were remembering the past and they had lost sight of the future God promised them. I’m sure Moses and Aaron were tired as well, but going back to Egypt wasn’t a part of their plan because it wasn’t a part of God’s plan.

As leaders today, going back to the past shouldn’t be a part of our plan either.

The road ahead of us is not easy, but we must continue to fill our tank for whatever may be next. *[The Kingdom Extension Community suggests you refuel your tank by participating in Fresh Expressions’ Future Church Summit, February 26–27.]*... And if you’re facing a Going Back to Egypt Committee, it just might be how God is preparing you for your next because that is how real life works.

There will always be a next and God will always be preparing you for it!



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 Found at <https://freshexpressionsus.org/2020/10/16/making-sense-of-the-chaos/>

## 2 Listening is More Important Now Than Ever

by Shannon Kiser, September 1, 2020

**Recently, the song “In the Air Tonight” by Phil Collins, which was originally released in 1980, hit the charts again.**

Why? Because twin YouTubers went viral.

These Gen-Z teens have populated their YouTube channel with videos in which they record themselves listening to new-to-them songs. The viewers get a front-row seat to their reaction to

songs that are often familiar to the viewer, but new to the YouTubers. As they listen for the first time to Phil Collins, it’s thrilling to watch these two guys get giddy about the drum fill: “I’ve never seen nobody drop the beat three minutes in the song! He killed that!”

What is so captivating about watching their videos is that the viewer is watching an in-the-moment, honest reaction to what

they are experiencing, how they encounter it, what moves them, what surprises them, and what excites them. You feel what they are feeling.

That’s what listening for mission is all about. Putting ourselves into opportunities and conversations in which we can encounter honest perspectives and begin to feel what people are feeling.

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**Churches have often become disconnected and desensitized to life outside their church bubble.**

Church members whose friends are all other church members have strayed further and further from intersection with people who have different assumptions, perspectives, or experiences than those of their church friends. They see their community through the lens of their own experiences.

How willing are we to do the work to learn from other perspectives and to listen to the perspectives and experiences of those outside our congregations? What would we learn about the lives of people in our community? How might we grow in compassion as a result? Is it possible that we could grow in our ability to feel what others are feeling, to celebrate what they are celebrating, to mourn what they are mourning (Romans 12: 15)? And that a meaningful mission could grow out of that kind of solidarity and mutuality?

**Mission that connects with people beyond your existing congregation starts with getting to know the people beyond your existing congregation.**

But instead of starting with a posture of listening and openness to encountering the perspectives of people in their community, churches often start from a self-serving place without even realizing it.

Here are some of the most common:

• **“We need to turn around our church decline!”** So instead of stepping into a posture of mission that emerges out of compassion and relationship, churches develop schemes out of desperation. Decline CAN be a catalyst to take some risks and try something new, but it can also be the desperation that leads to mission that treats people as targets and seeks only to grow membership rolls. Deep listening invites us to move from a posture of people-as-membership-targets to people-who-are-cherished-by-God.

• **“Those people need [fill in the blank].”** Starting from an us-and-them mentality is a recipe for failure. And often the presumption of Christians is that what “they” need is something that will foster “them” being more like “us.” This has led to some of the most destructive examples of missions in church history. Deep listening has the capacity to dismantle

divisions, deepen humility, and expose our shared humanity. This is a much more Christ-like starting point for mission.

• **“We have a great idea for a new mission!”** Yay for creative energy and enthusiasm to try new things! But all too often, church committees churn out program ideas in their meetings, without ever really doing any listening work to discern whether their big idea would even connect with the people they are hoping to serve. And then become disillusioned when they don’t get the participation that they had hoped for. It’s fine for motivated teams to brainstorm, but don’t neglect the listening that needs to happen to hone or reshape a good idea to a better idea.

• **We need to “reach people” in our community.** We often get so focused on our desire to reach people with the Gospel, motivated by the Great Commission, that we don’t allow people to reach us. Unless we’re willing to be challenged and changed and blessed by what we learn and receive, why should people we are hoping to “reach” be open to what we are motivated to share? Deep listening invites us to set aside our evangelism talking points and our agenda, and discover what it might look like for the good news of the kingdom of God to be experienced here and now and in the midst of the unfolding relationships.

**The pandemic has shifted some of the forms of listening in which we can engage, but it hasn’t changed the priority for listening for mission.**



Photo by Brett Jordan on Unsplash

# 3

## Listen to, Love and Serve Your Neighborhood

(excerpt from "Churches Who Survive the Pandemic Will do Three Things" by Chris Morton, August 31, 2020)

**IN A COMMUTER CULTURE,** churches, like schools and grocery stores, are less rooted in their neighborhoods and more "service provider" for those with a particular taste. While some people want a church they can walk to, many look for a church based on their children's ministry, worship style, or theological leanings. The pandemic has increased consumerist tendency exponentially, yet it may also create the opportunity to undermine it.

After almost every Sunday of the pandemic, you hear stories of Church live streams with people tuning in, not just from the pre-pandemic congregation, but from other cities and states. Many churches are happy to have the views, while others are exploring means of distance-membership. Serious ecclesiological work needs to be done here as to "what is the nature of the Church and can it be a translocal body?" However, it is hard to fault the individual Christian seeking connection and hope during the pandemic.

But there is another, much more local opportunity here that churches risk missing out on. The pandemic limitations forced on commuting, consumerist Americans are fertile soil for a renaissance of neighborhood. Adults working from home find themselves waving at neighbors as they walk their dog for the fourth time that day. Children schooling from home are creating jungle gyms in their front yards. Athletes unable to access their gym are

running and biking through their neighborhood. Every day, these people will pass the empty parking lots of churches.

On top of the devastation of the virus itself, there is also social and economic fallout. Historically, Christians have led the way in healthcare. Throughout centuries of pandemics, Jesus' disciples have rescued abandoned babies, cared for lepers and built hospitals, often at their own risk. The pandemic will cause many to be sick and die. Many have and will continue to lose their jobs. Others will go hungry.

### **Churches that thrive during and after the pandemic will listen to their neighborhoods.**

They'll discover the needs of those in pain. They'll discover the hopes of those who want to connect, want to help and don't know how. They'll uncover ways to love and serve their neighbors.

### **Churches that thrive during and after the pandemic will love and serve their literal neighbors.**

This includes those who live next door to a church building and those who live next door to the members of your pre-pandemic congregation. This may mean simply connecting for a socially distant conversation. This may mean opening up a dinner church for those who suddenly can't afford groceries. This may mean Christians risking their own health by providing care for the sick and dying.

Churches who love and serve now will be recognized for being a Jesus-like presence at a time when hope was desperately needed. People, inside and outside your church, will want to know what you are doing and why. Neighbors may even want to buy groceries for dinner church or help visit the sick.

### **However, it's doubtful that churches who turn inward during the pandemic will be able to turn outward afterward.**

When vaccines are readily available and a new normal develops, some churches will be remembered for loving their neighbors. Other churches won't be remembered at all.

### **Five Ways to Listen to, Love and Serve Your Neighborhood**

- 1 Meet your neighbors.** Knock on doors. Leave notes. Chat from a safe social distance.
- 2 Ask questions.** Find out what people need and don't need during the pandemic.
- 3 Serve those who serve.** Identify essential workers who need childcare. Throw drive-by parties celebrating doctors and nurses.
- 4 Use your parking lot.** Throw a socially-distant party. Become a drive-in theater. Offer outdoor karaoke. Just don't be invisible.
- 5 Start a dinner church.** Feed the hungry people in your neighborhood or find a neighborhood with hungry people.

(excerpt from "Churches Who Survive the Pandemic Will do Three Things" by Chris Morton, August 31, 2020)

**IN THE FIRST FEW WEEKS** of the pandemic, many churches scrambled to create online versions of their Sunday gatherings. Even leaders who had forsworn social media were suddenly preaching on Facebook live and counseling on Zoom. In those early days of lockdown, these opportunities to see a familiar face filled Christians' hungry hearts suddenly overwhelmed by isolation and the unknown. As time has gone on, these digital connections have grown tenuous.

Online interactions drive so much of life, but churches have not always been quick to establish a presence there. Moreover, churches seldom have a clearly thought out understanding of what it means to minister to people within the digital space. What ends up happening is that the church (or more likely, the pastor) finds a way to broadcast the tasks they feel most comfortable or competent on to social media. Churches that focus on community or relationships reworked their gatherings for Zoom, while churches known for highly-produced gatherings have highly produced online streaming services.

Seriously reckoning with the local churches presence in the digital world will require three areas of focus.



## First, churches need to "show up" on the internet.

A church's digital presence is the 21st century equivalent of having a legible sign and your name in the phone book. Churches who

show up on the internet need a:

- Simple website with the basic information (who, what, where, why and when) and basic SEO so that it can be found when searched for on Google.
- Pages on Yelp & Google Map
- Facebook Page and other social media accounts

Of course, there is much more that the church needs to do in order to take advantage of online tools. However attractive and accurate webpage and accounts are, the first step is to show up where people are looking.

## Second, churches need to incorporate digital strategy into all levels of ministry.

Sermon series should be planned with awareness of how they will be seen (in person or streaming) and listened to (in person or podcast). Fellowship events can be promoted via online event platforms. Recognizing key volunteers, and thus encouraging others to do likewise, can be done on social media. In the past, churches published sermon notes and bulletins to extend the Sunday experience. Today, this should include podcasts, YouTube videos, and Instagram Stories that continue the teaching and encouragement throughout the week.

Just posting an engaging Instagram Story is a tactic, it's not a strategy. Digital ministry means understanding how people engage digitally, thoughtfully incorporating digital into a church's strategies for attracting and discipling Christians looking for a church and a church's strategy for evangelizing those who are not

Christians. Christians looking for a church will search on Google, read Yelp reviews and peruse social media accounts. Those whom your church hopes to evangelize will engage first with social media accounts of their believing friends. Later, they'll look at pages and websites related to events and eventually, the church or fresh expression of church they encounter.

## Third, churches must understand that, as they make disciples, they are teaching people how to live out Jesus' teachings in the real places where their lives take place.

This means asking the question, what does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus on Twitter? And, yes, what would Jesus do with TikTok? Much has been said about Christian's gullibility and eagerness to accept conspiracy theories. Christians seem just as likely to make inflammatory social media posts or argue in hurtful ways online. For years, Christians have struggled with how to navigate the constant presence of online porn. These questions will only get more complicated with the growth of augmented reality

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and the realisticness of virtual reality. Churches are in the disciple-making business, and disciples live, in part, online.

### Five Ways to Integrate Your Church into the Digital Era

**1** Ensure your church "shows up online" with a good website, SEO and basic social media.

**2** Develop two digital pathways for introducing people to your church, one

for Christians looking for a church home and one for those exploring the Christian faith.

**3** Explore how you can tell stories about who your church is and what you do on social media.

**4** Follow your church members online, and, when interacting in person, mention things they posted.

**5** Teach about how to act like Jesus online.



**Be watching for the next KEC-sponsored Social Media for Churches workshop in the near future!**

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Read the full article here: <https://freshexpressionsus.org/2020/07/28/churches-who-survive-the-pandemic-will-do-three-things/>

## PRAYING FOR CHURCH PLANTING

### CURRENT PROJECTS:

#### *Churches and Church Plants*

- Ephrata, PA . . . Christ House Church (Tim King)
- Ephrata, PA . . . House of Blessings (Abe Montanez)
- Lehigh Valley, PA . . . Horizon (Bud Daneker)
- Pottstown area, PA . . . Journey53 (Rick Christman)
- Slatington, PA . . . Trinity (Brian Kern)
- Willow Street, PA . . . Virtual Church (Addison Roberts)
- York, PA . . . Iglesia Cristiana (Carlos Kelly)
- York, PA . . . The Next Step (Carlos Kelly)

#### *Partnerships*

- Lancaster, PA . . . Iglesia De Dios Ven A El (Luis Ramirez)
- Mohnton, PA . . . Dinner Church (Robert Shuey)
- Palmerton, PA . . . Gaming Grotto (Chris Bronico)
- Sinking Spring, PA . . . Fresh Expression Launches
- Slatington, PA . . . Dinner Church (Brian Kern)

### PLEASE PRAY FOR:

- Continued health, safety, and sense of well-being for our planters and their families as they navigate Covid-related circumstances
- Balance for life and ministry as our planters and their families take on each new day filled with the busyness attached to ministry
- Overflowing creative juices for our planters and ministry team leaders as they develop outreach ministries

Spiritual eyes to see the needs and concerns of the people they meet who are hungry for what they can't yet name ... Jesus

- Boldness to share Jesus in the right moments with the right words