Two Years Later: Where Are We Now? (Part 3)

By PAUL J. SCHARF

When I first heard of the concept of COVID-19 lockdowns in the United States, including effectively closing down many churches, my first thought was how many lives this would cost—not *save*.

Speaking broadly across our culture—including all congregations without regard to Biblical fidelity—it is my conviction that small churches are still the backbone of this nation, and serve as a lifeline for many, many people. (I believe this is also true in a spiritual sense with regard to those churches that *do* remain Biblically faithful; see 2 Thess. 2:6-7.) These people very often count on the friends they see and know from their local church to take them to the doctor, bring them their medications, and just visit and check up on them.

Looking at it from the ministry side, then, how have our churches fared during the past two years since the crisis broke out? I would submit that the big difference between those that have thrived and those that have merely—or barely—survived depends on their focus on effective communication.

In the previous installment, I encouraged churches and ministries to evaluate their responses to the changing ministry climate, now two years into the pandemic, and we considered especially the area of technology.

Based on my observations, I would add this thought in summary: The churches that did the best through the lockdowns were, by and large, those that were already prepared technologically. They already had equipment in place, and were already live streaming their services—and people were already used to tuning in to them. In many cases the pastor continued preaching as he had been—showing multi-media slides and speaking into the camera. Now he just had more people watching online and, in some cases, that was *a lot more people*! They were viewing a polished performance as opposed to a first-time attempt, and the preacher was freed up to address the situation at hand—or simply to continue seamlessly and confidently with the themes he had already been presenting.

Especially if you are committed to live streaming your services anyway, I would submit that this would be a good standard to which to aspire, before we approach another crisis.

In fact, I believe that anyone who has a message worth communicating who believes that more lockdowns—or something else akin to them—will occur again through the vicissitudes of these "perilous times" (2 Tim. 3:1) should seek to prepare in this fashion for the next go-around.

But I think that we also need to examine our response to the crisis specifically in the realm of communications. After all, you do not need expensive cameras, or any fancy equipment, to communicate with people. The mail still went out through the lockdowns, and a handwritten letter is still the *best* and most appreciated form of communication that there is.

As I have had the opportunity to minister in many different churches over the past two years, it seems to me that those churches that over-communicated through the time of crisis, and beyond, have fared exceedingly much better than those that under-communicated.

It is quite amazing to me to hear testimonies resulting from the latter. I have listened to a number of churchgoers who—to some extent or another—have felt left in the dark with regard to the inner workings of their churches during the pandemic.

Conversely, I've spoken with church leaders who have simply lost contact with members of their flocks due to "COVID." Now, if this was by the choice of those particular sheep involved, then perhaps nothing more could have been done. But if it was the result of our own negligence in communicating, then the verse that comes to mind is James 3:10: "My brethren, these things ought not to be so."

May I ask, what were we doing during those early days of the shutdowns, and in the time since, if not putting in place new avenues of communicating regularly and often, by every available means?

This was my goal in my position with The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry. Our leaders admonished us immediately to maintain and strengthen our communications during the crisis. I do not hold myself out as a model in this regard—only a fellow learner. But I will share what I have learned to date.

In 2020, as I was just beginning my second year with FOIGM, and still working a part-time secular job, the first thing that I needed to nail down was to prepare regular quarterly prayer/newsletters. Through some refinement, I now send these out in three categories—to individual supporters, supporting churches and other churches with which we have developed a tangible relationship in this ministry.

In addition, I strive to send out several other types of mailings in a systematic fashion, or as needed. Then, I try to be generous in sending out handwritten thank you cards.

During this time, I have also formulated a short "Weekly Prayer Update" that I send out to several churches and individuals each Wednesday morning. Finally, with the help of an expert volunteer, we have launched our "Weekly News Update" e-newsletter.

I am convinced that many churches lost people they should and could have kept during the COVID-19 crisis simply due to a lack of clear and compelling communication. I am also convinced that some people actually suffered, to some degree or other, because of this lapse. I am further convinced that all of this was unnecessary.

As we learn from the last crisis and, especially, prepare for the next one, I do not see any element that will be more important for our ministries than to develop all means of communicating effectively.

What have you learned from the last two years in this regard? In the true spirit of this column, I would love for you to share it!

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