

The Church's COVID-19 Response Evaluation

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In the United States, March 2020 is when the world turned upside down. Many lives were changed by a silent and invisible enemy called COVID-19, which has impacted many different aspects of society. It has impacted financially on the macro-level. It has impacted the unity of organizations and communities on the mezzo-level, and it has changed the lives of an individual's security, comfort, and peace on the micro-level. COVID-19 has disturbed many organization's structures, financial security, and affectedness. According to Wildman, Bulbulia, Sosis, & Schjoedt (2020), there are churches in the United States that are not preparing their congregation appropriately. Some churches are disregarding the government's order, which resulted in members of the congregation becoming fatally ill or sick. My church took the news of COVID-19 seriously and humbled themselves by putting other's safety first. However, due to technology, there are church organizations that converted remotely to continue their purposes and still reach people virtually. For instance, my job is at a non-denominational church in New Jersey, and this organization had to transform each ministry online. I work for the children's ministry, which ages range from infant to fifth graders. My church has a large congregation of three thousand people. My church also has many departments that all serve different populations and needs. The departments include children's ministry, student ministry, young adult ministry, special needs inclusion ministry, mothers with preschooler's ministry, care ministry, outreach ministry, and so forth. Each one of these ministries serves a particular purpose to further God's kingdom, and each department had to convert virtually to reach its population. There have been negatives and positives, but overall, we rest in the fact that God is with us, and He is in control. This paper will demonstrate their responses and transitions to COVID-19 in selected ministries.

The first Sunday of March was when COVID-19 started to arise on the news. The church instantly responded to the congregation to ease any anxiety or concerns. The church sent an email to all the contacts the church has on its congregation software. The email entailed the specifics of how the church and the staff are doing to keep the congregation safe. The staff was notified of how the church is preparing for the COVID-19 outbreak. The Executive Pastor shared with the staff that they asked their cleaning company to spend extra time disinfecting the main building and office building. The Pastor shared that they ordered additional Purell stands for the lobby, foyer, main building, student ministry building, and other campus buildings. An email was sent to the ushers, greeters, and welcome team to refrain from shaking hands or hugs as others come into the building. To limit the number of people touching the computer screens for the check-in procedure for parents who have kids in the children's ministry that a volunteer will be the one touching the computer screen for the parents. As for communion service, the church ordered prefilled communion cups that come with an individually wrapped wafer to reduce the risk of spreading germs. Also, the general manager of the office was asked to think through what it would be needed for staff members to work virtually in case of needing to close the office, such as purchasing additional laptops. There was also an increase in ordering office supplies such as Clorox wipes to encourage the staff to regularly wipe down phones, keyboards, desks, and other surfaces. The Pastor also indicated the importance of including in the Church's news database that giving online is an option with detailed instructions on how to set this up on the church's website. Therefore, my church was well organized and prepared on how to address the necessary precautions to keep the congregation safe, and the staff well equipped and trained.

Thus, the government shut down large groups from meeting in person shortly after the church's initial response of safety preparations and instructions. It took each ministry a week to

convert to virtual meetings and reaching their department's population. For Sunday's messages, deliverance from the Pastor was the most practical and more accessible conversion to online because the church already has an online campus to start, which live-streamed the worship band and Pastor's message previously. The only difference was that the online campus had many more viewers since the majority of the congregation that usually attended the church building, now attends online. However, for the children's ministry, one Sunday was missed because the ministry had to prepare the volunteers and leaders on how to upload and access Zoom account for the leaders to teach Sunday School to each grade. The children's ministry team provided detailed instructions on how leaders can access Zoom to reach the kids. Then, all the families from this ministry were given detailed instructions on how to log on for each Sunday so that their kids can still have worship, Bible lesson, and activity. The team sent out the curriculum to all the leaders in each grade so they can prepare an activity that relates to the teaching.

Consequently, the leaders had to commit and understand that they are now responsible for preparing for an activity that relates to the provided lesson. Usually, I am the one who creates and makes each combined grade two activities to complete on Sundays, which totaled eight activities. For example, I designed and prepared two activities for the kindergarten and first-grade level, two activities for the second and third-grade level, and two activities for the fourth and fifth-grade level. So, this was a significant transition for the volunteer small group leaders because they were responsible for their own virtual activities. At the beginning of this transition, the ministry's team had security issues with the Zoom accounts. The ministry has policies in place to protect children and prevent instances from occurring. The policies have not changed their purpose except for indicating the policies remain the same, but virtually. This meant that there should never be any adult alone on Zoom with the kids. There should always be

two to three small group leaders in the Zoom video call to hold each other accountable and keep the children safe from any possible endangerments. To keep the kids safe virtually, the ministry team had to train and instruct how to set up the safety features on Zoom. For example, the small group leaders had to disable the private chat access so that there are no possibilities of the kids threatening each other or being threatened by a small group leader. Another safety procedure was for all Zoom accounts to have a “waiting room” with each child’s full name displayed so that no stranger or possible hacker was invited into the Zoom video call. The “waiting room” helps there to be secure so that we can establish a safe virtual environment.

As for the care ministry, they transitioned online as well to reach their population. However, since COVID-18 has enhanced mental health issues, financial issues, and necessities such as food, there has been a higher demand. The care ministry is doing its best to take care of their congregation and the people in need. Tsin Chih Chen, Kim, Lin, Wu, Tsai & Hsing (2020) stressed the importance of supporting attendees from the congregation that is sixty-five years and older. These valuable contacts can be overwhelming with a church this size. To help the care ministry in contacting the people, the entire staff pitched in to help. The list of contacts from the *Church Teams* software database was distributed to the staff team to make phone calls to catch up with people and request prayer requests and note any needs that need to be addressed. For example, the staff prioritized the list of the elderly first to be contacted. Then, the vulnerable population was next such as, individuals with special needs and then those who are working on the frontlines during this pandemic. Distributing the extensive list helped ease the stress for the care ministry, and it also made their purpose to be more productive.

The care ministry has also reached out to the local community to see where there is a need. The reach out concluded in finding out non-profit organizations in the area that require

resources, such as food. The care ministry connected the church with the Salvation Army and the food pantry non-profit organization. The connections helped the congregation get involved in assisting others in need by dropping off canned goods in the bins that were placed in front of the main building at church. This helped the community to have an opportunity to serve and love others in the community through giving. This ministry also had a significant transition because their outreach created attention to restaurants in the area. For instance, an expensive steakhouse restaurant called the church stating that they would like to help families in need by cooking them free dinners and asked if the care ministry can deliver the dinners to the families. This has been a humbling service opportunity and is now on the fifth week of partnerships. This has been the most rewarding ministry thus far due to so many people being blessed, as well as feeling blessed to get to serve the community by providing food in God's love.

The most significant downfalls from COVID-19 is that the congregation giving has taken a hit. A decrease in giving results in the church having to establish financial boundaries. For instance, there needs to be a decrease in expenses to equate to the quantity that comes in. However, it has been noted that there is a reduction in costs by not having to hire a law enforcement officer every Sunday for a patrol to keep the congregation safe. Another decline in the expenses is that there is no need to spend money on paper programs for each church attendee. Thus, these limitations have benefitted the church's expenses. Another significant downfall is that since the church is relying on technology and Wi-Fi, there are more technical issues to endure. However, the church has an incredible technical support team that has been resolving the technical issues within each ministry's technology, as well as Sunday's online campus.

The downfalls and quick virtual transitions can cause stress and in need of valuable stress management for the church organization's mission to be sufficient for their congregation and

staff. Kirst-Ashman & Hull (2018) stated that stress can cause individuals to flee from it or avoid confronting anxiety. This statement is relative during all the ministries from church having to transition to everything online. Technology is not always a friendly tool for everyone to use. The key symptom of stress can result in “I am incompetent” (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2018). Incompetency in technology has been a profound symptomatic statement of stress used with each population across all ministries at church due to a lack of technical knowledge. I am the first one to say that I am technologically challenged and struggled at the beginning of quarantine life, managing all the logistics of Zoom, Microsoft Teams video chats, or Gmail Hangouts. The stress and frustrations of inadequate technology knowledge can result in impacting the work setting. Therefore, it is essential for staff members to adopt stress-management strategies to effectively help congregation members who are also experiencing stress related to technological challenges.

The two approaches to stress management strategies that work for me are deep breathing relaxation and social support. Deep breathing is an effective technique to learn to ease the tension your body is enduring during stress. Social support is an approach that can help you overcome the stress or anxiety by someone else relating the shared stress, and then it can be used to help others that you come across that have similar frustrations. The social support I believe is the most significant approach for each ministry at a church organization because it helps everyone realize that they are not alone in feeling stressed during the times of uncertainties, as well as during the times of enduring and persevering through sudden virtual transitions. Even though there has been a significant impact of problems stemming from COVID-19, I think God has been using individuals more and their God-given gifts to bless and support other individuals in need. Personally, I see more people become like social workers. The National Association of

Social Workers (2017) states that social workers are called to help people in need and to address social problems. I am certainly seeing others become like social workers by providing the vulnerable population with their needs and providing hope that they are here for support and persevere through this pandemic of COVID-19.

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