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Joel Franks  
*Cultivate Church, Athens, Alabama*

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# **The Quarantine Olympics of Cultivate Church in Athens, Alabama**

*Joel Franks*

It was the best of times, then it was the worst of times. Dickens might have been writing that about 2020 for Cultivate Church in Athens, AL, outside of Huntsville. In January 2020, we celebrated our first anniversary as a church, achieved record highs for Sunday attendance (77), for mid-week Bible study attendance (45), and for the number of discipleship groups (7 groups). We were riding a wave of steady, solid growth. People were being saved and 7 had been baptized. A community of believers who cared for one another was being cemented together in the love of Christ. It was this feeling of community and family that was most attractive to people who came to visit almost every week.

Athens is a rapidly growing city with a population of 28,000 that is part of the Huntsville metropolitan area. Almost every person that joined our church community was from some other city or state. Not a single person in our church was native to Athens. As a result, the young church quickly came together as a group because these people did not have many relationships in town. Like the church's leadership team of 5 people, they had recently moved to Athens to take advantage of the booming development.

When our government imposed a stay-at-home order in April of 2020, my greatest fear was that we would lose that sense of togetherness. While it is quite possible to worship God through technology, there is no natural sense of community associated with using technology. Watching a screen is not the same as being physically in the same room as other believers.

There is nobody there to share a handshake or a warm hug after a rough week at work. There is no sanctuary from the trials that people deal with on a regular basis. In our church family, most everybody continued to work. So, the pressure of the daily grind was still there, but the release of that pressure that comes from fellowship with the family of God was gone.

As our leadership team met together, our focus was clear: How do we keep everybody engaged with each other while at the same time reaching out into the community to share the gospel? Obviously, we were going to have to think creatively. So, we bounced ideas off each other. Most of them were crazy and unfeasible. However, whenever many ideas are generated, there always seems to be one that grows into something useful.

My wife, Melanie, suggested a game show of some sort. I had never organized a game show. I don't watch game shows. I don't even like game shows! But as we brainstormed about the possibilities, we determined to give it a try. I knew that all successful church planters are willing to try new activities, activities that are different from what they have done in the past. Just because a church planter does not like an activity, it doesn't mean that it will be ineffective. Different is not a curse word. Different is not bad. Different may be difficult, but different is not bad when it has the potential to contribute to a church's God-ordained goals. It is true that church leaders might fail when they try something different, but why should that be a hindrance? Many times, we fail when we are doing the same old things we have done before, yet that doesn't stop us from doing the same old things! The Cultivate Church motto could have become "Never be afraid to try something different."

We decided to experiment with a gameshow to be broadcast on Facebook Live about two weeks after the lockdown started. The first event was a success, so for the two months that our community was under lockdown, we used Facebook Live to interact with the folks in our city as we played "Pictionary", "Family Feud", "Heads Up", and "Quarantine Survival Item Scavenger Hunt." We did our best to make it a Friday night must-see event. At our Sunday morning online services, we promoted this activity as the first-ever "Cultivate Quarantine Olympic Games." We created invitations to the games with a logo and a brief description. We encouraged the people of our church to share this invitation on their social media pages.

When that first Friday came, we wore "Quarantine Olympics" t-shirts and built a makeshift set in our home. I have found that you need hosts who are capable of being funny without trying too hard. My associate church planter and I are able to feed off each other's comments and improvise well. He plays the classic slapstick comedian to my straight

character. We had a ball making the few members of our live audience (i.e., our families) laugh, knowing that the online viewers were enjoying it as well.

In order to achieve the goal of making contact with new families in Athens who weren't already familiar with our church, we created an invitation for an online scavenger hunt announcing a Quarantine Survival Package would be given as a prize to the winning household. We purchased a huge basket and filled it with all sorts of goodies for dad, mom, and the children. We included candies, snacks, books, and gift cards. We even added a few rolls of toilet paper when it was hard to come by! We promised that the winning family would receive contactless delivery to their home.

That Friday, we played a classic scavenger hunt. We would call out an ordinary household item that everyone would need to make it through an extended period at home. Each family had to find the item that was announced and text us a picture of themselves with that item. The first photo received earned a point. It was readily apparent that our families were having a blast as their pictures rolled in. Moreover, everybody got to see each other having fun as we shared the photos on Facebook Live. Most importantly, three new families that we had never met joined in on the fun, even sending us their photos to share with the others.

Before that first night was over, we had contacted several people that we did not know. Some of them joined us for online worship services the following Sunday. One family that first contacted us online during the lockdown now regularly attends our church. Fruit is still showing up from those "Quarantine Olympics" as I talked to a man just a few days ago that is watching our online services and plans to attend in person as soon as their new baby is able. He was one that I personally invited for a little fun on Friday nights during the stay-at-home-order.

As the restrictions lessened in our area, we began to do more in-person family events again, such as oil changes for single moms done by the men in the church with a brunch for these moms and their kids organized by the women in the church. But there is still a place for these online family fun times. When winter weather plagued the south in early 2021, many in our area were frightened to go out on the roads. So, we decided to run the gameshow again. Although we live in a culture that is saturated with media, this is something different from the norm. It is personalized. Even the small children that have notoriously short attention spans seem to stay engaged when they see a familiar face on the screen.

These online gameshows give our people something to invite their friends and family members to enjoy, many of whom do not attend church. We have another one planned in a few weeks. Cultivate was chosen as the name of the church with the idea of "Cultivating relationships with people

as we all cultivate a relationship with Christ.” These online events allow them to break the ice and cultivate relationships with others that lead to an opportunity to share the Gospel. Only then can they know what it is like to be a member of His family and become functioning members of the Cultivate family. Do not allow being stuck in the house to be an excuse to fail in evangelizing those who need to hear the gospel!

### **About the Author**

Joel Franks is a husband to Melanie, father of Jonathan and Makayla, and a church planter with Free Will Baptist North American Ministries. He currently serves at Cultivate Church in Athens, Alabama.

## **CULTIVATE CHURCH**

**ATHENS, ALABAMA**

**Year founded:** 2019

**Denomination or Network:** Freewill Baptist North American Ministries

**Weekly Attendance:** 70s

**Location:** suburban, 21 miles west of Huntsville