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Quick Responses to Community Needs in Two Churches During the Pandemic

Brad Ransom and Edward Moody

Many churches have been doing the same thing for decades to reach people with the Gospel. The pandemic in the early spring of 2020 shook most churches to the core. Cities, counties, and states in the US began issuing stay-at-home orders. Churches across the country (and the world) were forced to stop gathering in person. Almost overnight, our methods for reaching people were invalid. No longer could the “come and see” or “seeker service” be used to introduce people to the Gospel or to our churches. Many churches adapted quickly while others moved more slowly. Only time will tell, but it appears that the churches which made quick changes navigated the rough seas easier than those which were slow to adapt.

Many churches with congregational rule in the US have a complicated structure which includes committees that must grant their approval and eventually a vote by the body in order to make changes to a church’s meeting schedule, ministries, and philosophical approach. Some are slow to implement the changes which must be approved by a long process. During the 2020 pandemic, there simply was not time for many of these churches to move through their normal procedures, and they were forced to either break tradition or move very slowly in the quickly changing climate of the “pandemic church.”

In this article, we will look at two churches that adapted quickly and rebounded in places where the restrictions were among the tightest in the country. They adapted by changing the way they utilized technology and ministered to the community.

Two Very Different Churches: The Bridge and Bluepoint

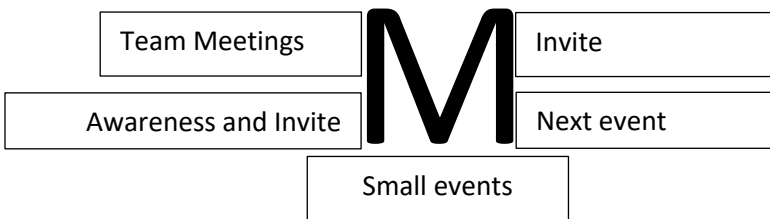
The Bridge Church in Fredericksburg, Virginia, launched March 1, 2020, with 227 people in a local public-school gymnasium. The Bridge Church is part of the National Association of Free Will Baptists. Suburban Fredericksburg (population 24,000) is about 1 hour and 30 minutes south of Washington, DC. On March 30, 2020, a stay-at-home order was issued, just weeks after the launch of the church.

On the other hand, Bluepoint Church is in Cisne, Illinois, a rural town with a population of 672, two hours east of St. Louis, MO, and three hours west of Louisville, KY. Bluepoint Church is 123 years old with a senior pastor who has served for 36 years and like the Bridge, is part of the National Association of Free Will Baptists. Both churches adapted quickly to the pandemic.

The Bridge Church

The Bridge Church was led by lead church planter, Chris Davenport. He learned to lead an infant congregation during a global pandemic on the fly.

The Bridge Church quickly shifted from Sunday morning services to daily connections with their community. The church immediately launched several house church gatherings (limited in size by State directives) which continued to meet weekly throughout the church shutdown period. In each of these gatherings, the focus was outreach and discipleship. They adapted and promoted the “M” model of discipleship originally developed by Stadia (stadiachurchplanting.org).



The lower left leg of the M represents awareness of people’s needs and invitations to the church where these needs can be met. The top left peak on the M stands for meetings of teams of people who sought to support one another through fellowship and create programs to meet the community’s needs. The bottom middle point focuses on small events that they could do for their neighbors, coworkers, and community within the stay-at-home guidelines, such as small group Bible studies or writing

letters to express appreciation to frontline workers; at first most of these events were held online, and then as the restrictions were lowered, in small groups of two or three families. The top right peak of the M encourages church members to constantly invite others outside of the church to the church (small group) gatherings. The lower right point connects people to the next church-sponsored event. Everyone was encouraged to think through this model and implement it in their daily personal lives.

In addition, every person connected with the church was encouraged to create a “FAN” list. “FAN” is an acrostic for “Friends, Associates, and Neighbors.” As each person developed a list of their unchurched friends, associates, and neighbors, they were coached on how to move them through the M model of discipleship.

Another innovation was the use of video technology. The church was blessed to have a professional filmmaker and videographer on their team who immediately went to work shooting and producing not only Sunday sermon videos but also promotional and encouraging videos addressed to the town of Fredericksburg as a community.

Writing Ministry. The Bridge Church began a letter-writing ministry and hand-wrote over 1,000 letters and cards to nurses and teachers. They were able to get other churches involved as well. The wife of one of the pastors was a nurse in the community hospital who was able to deliver them to other nurses. It was not unusual to find Pastor Davenport’s business card at the nurse’s station at the hospital, and the church received many contacts through the writing ministry.

Food Ministry. Since many of the students in the area received their food from the schools they attended, it became critical to distribute food. The Bridge Church, which was renting a public school for their Sunday meetings, used the relationships they had developed to partner with the city’s schools to supply food for families. They also partnered with government agencies and restaurants using a “drop off” system which included delivering gift cards to families from restaurants as well as sealed and packaged meals from restaurants. This became a ministry to the restaurants which desperately needed the revenue; the church provided volunteers and drivers who would order food from local restaurants, pick it up and deliver it.

The church also sought to minister to other frontline workers. Many of the teachers were discouraged, so the church endeavored to bless them with gift cards. The church also partnered with restaurants to provide barbeque and donuts to law enforcement officers during the social justice protests that took place in the summer.

Bluepoint Church

When the governor of Illinois issued a stay-at-home order on Saturday, March 21, 2020, Pastor Ernie Lewis began posting a prerecorded daily morning devotion on Facebook. The church had not been using its website, so they redoubled their efforts to update it. They worked with their worship team and began recording and broadcasting services to post on Facebook and their website. The church was surprised by how many people watched their services and especially by the response from people in other towns in the county who contacted them about their services.

There was nothing technologically excellent about the broadcasts. For example, after a glitch, the first service was broadcast rotated 90 degrees. However, the key was consistency and steady improvement with an encouraging tone.

Many of the elderly became isolated in the community. The isolation was exacerbated by their limited technological skills with smartphones that most of the elderly had received from their children. To address this, during pastoral visits to the elderly, the pastor would ask to add a shortcut icon to their phones which took them directly to the church's live stream.

Writing Ministry. Bluepoint Church wanted to keep in contact with its members. The church leaders did so by writing weekly letters and sending cards to congregants on holidays. Additionally, the community has a newspaper which is widely read by the elderly in the community. The church submitted a weekly article to keep the community updated about activities and resources the church was providing (e.g., food distribution and devotions).

Food Ministry. The Bluepoint Church also worked with local government officials to provide watermelons and cantaloupes for people in the community. As a small community, the church and government officials were well acquainted with each other. The church also received boxes of groceries that members were able to distribute to people who had been identified to be in need. In addition to responding to physical needs, this distribution provided emotional support to those who had been isolated. One parishioner had just opened a restaurant before the onset of COVID. The church bought meals for people in the community from this restaurant, so they were able to meet the needs of others as well as support the local restaurant. Church leaders were able to interact with the people when they dropped the food off. Often long discussions ensued in the yard of the recipients.

Providing Encouragement. Indoor funeral services were not a possibility, but Bluepoint began conducting outdoor funeral services that were allowed for families. These funerals, and food prepared by the

church, provided support and encouragement to the families who lost loved ones during this dark time.

Building Renovation. Before COVID, the Bluepoint Church had planned to remodel its building. Since they were unable to conduct services, this worked to their advantage. It was easier to conduct the renovation, and it provided an opportunity to feel a sense of community. Since only the contractors were allowed on the premises for the work, church leaders made a photo album to document the progress and included pictures of various church members to the degree possible. As meals were delivered to the community, people would look at the photo album. Though isolated, seeing the building progress and photos of church members made them feel that they were part of something bigger.

Adapting Quickly Led to Critical Results

The Bridge Church recently celebrated its one-year anniversary and was able to meet in person. In their short history, they have had eight confessions of faith, eight baptisms, and 17 rededications. They have made an indelible impact on the community of Fredericksburg, Virginia. While they saw an average of 70 online viewers each week during the shutdown period, they have averaged almost 78 in weekly attendance since they have been allowed to resume services in person. Although a one-year-old church averaging just under 80 is not record-breaking, the Bridge Church is a church that has greatly impacted its community. It has continued to use its home church groups as community small groups and is planning to add new groups soon. Ask anyone in town, and they will likely identify The Bridge as a church that cares about people and the community.

Though Bluepoint Church is in an entirely different context, they, too, were able to have a positive impact on their community. As Pastor Lewis noted, “You just have to adapt and do what you can.” The leaders of the church became convinced they could not go back to ministry as it was before the pandemic.

Both churches have noted that they made contacts in the pandemic they would never have made otherwise. Sometimes this was through their technology, but other times it was through their partnerships with community leaders. Many people’s eternity depends on the local church in their community; we all need to be innovators as we navigate our churches’ futures in a post-pandemic age.

About the Authors

Brad Ransom is a native of Southern California but spent 33 years of his adult life serving churches and his denomination in Oklahoma. He currently serves as Director of Church Planting and Chief Training Officer for Free Will Baptist North American Ministries in Nashville, Tennessee. His passion is training and coaching pastors to plant and revitalize churches. Ransom currently serves as the first Vice President of the Great Commission Research Network.

Edward E. Moody, Jr. serves as the executive secretary of the National Association of Free Will Baptists. He served as pastor at Tippetts Chapel in Clayton, North Carolina, for almost two decades. He is a former associate dean and professor at the school of education at North Carolina Central University.

BLUEPOINT CHURCH CISNE, ILLINOIS

Year founded: 1898

Denomination or Network: National Association of Freewill Baptists

Weekly Attendance: 130

Location: Rural, two hours east of St. Louis, MO

Website: bluepointchurch.com

THE BRIDGE CHURCH FREDERICKSBURG, VIRGINIA

Year founded: 2020

Denomination or Network: National Association of Freewill Baptists

Weekly Attendance: 80

Location: Suburban, an hour and a half south of Washington, DC

Website: bridgefbg.com