

Discoveries & Learnings from the Global Pandemic

Discoveries

Discoveries about the virus itself

1. **Dealing with an elusive opponent.** Ed Yong said in a recent *Atlantic Monthly* article entitled, "Our Pandemic Summer," "The pandemic is not a hurricane or a wildfire. It is not comparable to Pearl Harbor or 9/11. Such disasters are confined in time and space." I would add "matter" in the sense that, "You don't know who has it who doesn't" and "energy" in the sense that it is very difficult to ascertain where it is gaining or decreasing in momentum. From a physical approach, matter, space, time, and energy define the essence of something. All four of those are elusive with COVID-19, hence, the unprecedented stress caused by it.

Discovery Question: In what ways is COVID-19 similar or different from other problems that you have faced?

2. **New heroes and a non-human enemy.** In my area, doctors, nurses, and first responders are now receiving well-deserved thank you's; discounts at restaurants, salons, and retail stores; days of the week and month dedications, etc. What and whom a society rewards influences the culture of that society. Some of this happened after 9/11, but then we still had a human enemy. You cannot shoot a virus. Will recognizing these heroes and banning together to defeat a non-human enemy lead to a greater appreciation of our community and less emphasis upon destroying someone else's community?

Discovery Question: Who are some of the personal heroes that you can identify amidst this global pandemic and how can you recognize them?

3. **New Dance Partner.** "Everyone wants to know when this will end," said Devi Sridhar, a public-health expert at the University of Edinburgh. "That's not the right question," he said. "The right question is: How do we continue with this new reality?" More and more I am hearing persons admit that we will never be able to return to our pre-pandemic days. The new normal comes with new parameters. As we return to shopping areas and church buildings, it must be done with social distancing, wearing masks, and constant cleaning. These are evidences that the virus is still very present among us. Even after a vaccine is discovered, the culture will not be the same after discovering a new vulnerability about ourselves. No one wants to dance with a virus, but we may need to learn how to dance with the effects caused by it.

Discovery Question: What are some of the new realities created by COVID-19?

- 4. The power of disruption.** COVID-19 has disrupted every facet of life. Currently, we are eating, socializing, shopping, communicating, working, relaxing, worshiping, and ministering differently because of this virus. Because of its elusive nature and wide reach, it has the power to wipe the slate clean on many fronts. The bad news is that many of our old habits and practices have been disrupted. The good news is also that many of our old habits and practices have been disrupted. Disruption can wreak havoc on our lives, but it can also surface tremendous opportunities. Consider some of the disruptions caused by Jesus as he healed on the Sabbath, ate with sinners, walked among the lepers, praised the unnamed and lambasted the elite. Each one created unprecedented pandemonium and unparalleled prospects.

Discovery Question: In what ways has your life been disrupted by COVID-19?

- 5. The importance of data.** Even though we are dealing with an elusive opponent, data helps us gain a more clarity about it and our environment. There has been a resurgence of reliance upon facts without fear, testimony from trusted sources, and charts and graphs that seek to inform rather than seek to persuade. We are beginning to request the source of information and forming our own opinions based upon multiple sources. Personally, I am delighted to see how many persons are now talking "statistics!" Data helps us make informed decisions. Just as CSI personnel have an oath the follow the evidence wherever it leads, trustworthy statisticians have an oath to present reliable information, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions. To that end, a survey of ABC congregations is currently being conducted and the results will be shared soon.

Discovery Question: How can we contribute to the knowledge database in ways that help others make sound decisions?

Discoveries for individuals

- 6. Cognitive abilities are on overload.** An ABC pastor recently shared the following story: the other evening as he headed out to the kitchen, his wife asked him to unplug the crockpot and bring back her tablet. Halfway back, he realized he had unplugged her tablet and was bringing her the crockpot. That's how our minds have been functioning lately. One of our executive ministers recently replied to the question, "What would you like for breakfast?" with the response, "Oh please, don't force me to make another decision. Anything will be fine as long as I don't have to choose." Our minds are on overload for a variety of reasons, including the disruption of our routines, decision fatigue, and escalating decisions. Previously, many of us could point to the more difficult decisions in front of us when confronted with a list, just like circling the toughest challenges on an upcoming sports

schedule (if you still remember what sporting events are). Today, we are often surprised how the next unforeseen decision is more complicated than the previous one. One example is that the decision to return to the church building is proving more difficult than the decision to abandon it a few months ago.

Discovery Question: How has COVID-19 influenced your mental health?

- 7. Availability of leaders.** Several months ago, I received invitations to attend four meetings the same week. With no cloning ability, I obviously could only accept one of the invitations. When that week finally arrived, I was able to attend three of the four due to an abbreviated and online format for each of the meetings. The fourth meeting was canceled completely or I might have been four for four. Leaders consistently portray being overwhelmed with meetings due to the increased accessibility that has come with COVID-19. For persons who travel, especially denominational staff, there was always some built in breaks due to the fact of needing to travel from one meeting to another. Many have noted that those breaks are gone and some have expressed that they feel like they have been cloned.

Discovery Question: What are appropriate levels of access and availability of leaders during a pandemic and into the new realities caused by it?

- 8. Relationships revisited.** One of the learnings from the pandemic is that it is possible to build community using online tools. Relationships launched prior to the pandemic seem easier to build, but brand new relationships are also possible via electronic devices. I am aware of at least one search committee that has called a candidate to serve, with whom the committee and candidate have only had online introductions. Weekly conference calls with the executive ministers have also built community in surprising ways. Trust appears deeper. Humor has increased. Extending the benefit of the doubt has become more commonplace. For a moment at least, we are thinking about the group rather than ourselves, and that is always positive.

Discovery Question: How have you been able to launch and deepen relationships using technology during this pandemic?

- 9. Grief is real.** While subtle for some, grief abounds during this pandemic. Busyness and adrenaline have masked grief for some leaders. For others it is at the forefront of their actions and inaction. Each new round of cancellations brings new grief. With new losses comes new grief. Left unrecognized, grief chips away at hope like the escalating bad news that confronts a terminally ill patient. Self-awareness is critically important during this global health pandemic. Amy Mehl, whom I previously met during a "Leadership Circle" training event, identifies grief symptoms during this pandemic as unsteadiness, confusion, and great vulnerability. A former seminary professor of mine, Andy Lester, said that fear and anger always accompany grief, and

usually surface irrationally. When we direct anger in undeserved directions and express fear over trivial items, these may be signs of grief. One of our executive ministers suggests that “naming the loss” is the first and most important step in dealing with grief.

Discovery Question: In what ways are you experiencing grief during this global pandemic?

Discoveries for society

10. Congregations are impacted, yet resilient. Congregations with no available expertise and pent up resistance toward streaming worship services have done just that. While larger congregations already had the production equipment for an online presence, smaller congregations with little or no equipment have engaged their members electronically as well. The sampling of worship services that I view each week has grown in quality and the ability to connect with the participants. Most congregations are reporting increased attendance. Some reports are five-fold of previous numbers. While church buildings closed, the church itself expanded. For many congregations, giving has remained at sustainable rates. Not all impacts, however, are positive. While 81.2% of U.S. congregations have been able to launch an online worship service according to the Pew Research Center, this means that nearly 1 in 5 congregations have not been able to do so. In terms of giving, a survey conducted by the National Association of Evangelicals showed that 65% of the 1,000 congregations surveyed had seen a decline in giving from mid-March. Overall, 34% of congregations had seen a drop of 10-30%, 22% had seen a drop of 30-75%, and 9% had seen a drop of more than 75%. Churches with substantial income through rental space have also been highly impacted.

Discovery Question: How has your congregation displayed resiliency during this global pandemic?

11. Healing of the earth. We can heal the earth. Los Angeles recently reported that they are experiencing some of the cleanest air on earth, a fact unfathomable just a few months ago. Cleaner air, rivers, and oceans are all welcome byproducts of this pandemic. While the state of the environment did not prompt the clean-up, we have answered the question of whether or not humans could ever turn around decades of creation degradation with a resounding, “Yes!” Will the answer to this question now work its way to the center of our discussions rather than remain as a byproduct? Dennis Johnson, author of *To Live in God; Daily Reflections with Walter Rauschenbusch*, recently identified one of his favorite passages from the book, “For the Present We Are Here,” which begins, “This earth is even now the habitation of God, and it is ours to make it wholly so. It is not a place to be spurned, but a home to be loved and made clean and holy.”

Discovery Question: How have you experienced a cleaner environment?

12. Mammoth nodes. Nodes are points of connection. They may be individuals, groups, or organizations. Several years ago, I poured through the predictions of Albert-Laszlo Barabasi in his book, *Linked: How Everything is Connected to Everything Else and What It Means for Business, Science, and Everyday Life*, and have recently watched many of these come true. In his book, he describes how certain nodes have the potential to become gigantic because so many nodes pass through the same connection to link with one another. Companies like Google, Zoom, Chegg, and Amazon are fulfilling Barabasi's predictions. While the stock market has seen steep declines, some companies have grown in capacity during the pandemic. A portion of the growth is based upon the organization's ability to attract constituents especially during crises. This theory also has implications for congregations. It does not mean that smaller congregations are doomed, but it does mean that larger congregations and organizations have some built in advantages during times of crisis. Laura Everett of the Massachusetts Council of Churches expresses this fear: "I am terrified that we will come out on the other side of this and there will only be wealthy churches. There are wealthy churches with strong financial reserves and the ability to survive even COVID-19. Then there are smaller, struggling churches whose members now and in generations past have been held back by racial and economic injustice."

Discovery Question: What groups in your community have been able to grow even during the pandemic?

13. Economic injustices exposed. Light has shone upon the gap between haves and have-nots. Many persons do not have and cannot afford protections from the virus including a home, insurance, reserve funds, etc. This gap could grow even wider as lower income families are more likely to have internet issues, space issues, job losses, and may be more likely to contract COVID-19 due to having service industry jobs. The National Council of Churches recently made this statement, "This pandemic also shines a light on the hierarchy of human life as we live it. Many essential workers considered essential are treated as expendable. Grocery clerks, orderlies, custodians, restaurant workers, delivery drivers, warehouse workers, and countless others — are at the bottom of the economic ladder. They are required to show up at work and maintain the comfort of others without having necessary resources to protect themselves or their families." The Rev. Dr. James E. McJunkin Jr., Regional Executive Pastor of The Philadelphia Baptist Association exhorts, "We must release the strangle hold of this public health crisis upon our economy through deliberate responsible healing actions (not manic anger). I contend that the followers of the Way should unite in a concerted effort to protect the living. We must advocate for public policy that heals life and brings strength to our economy."

Discovery Question: What economic disparities have you been made more aware of as a result of COVID-19?

14. Racial injustices exposed. A pandemic has the power to shed light on both the courageous and inspiring as well as the cowardly and disturbing. In a recent study, the CDC found that 45% of individuals for whom race or ethnicity data was available were white, compared to 55% of individuals in the surrounding community. However, 33% of hospitalized patients were black compared to 18% in the community. In terms of causes, they further report that, "health differences between racial and ethnic groups are often due to economic and social conditions that are more common among some racial and ethnic minorities than whites. In public health emergencies, these conditions can also isolate people from the resources they need to prepare for and respond to outbreaks." Yet, minorities are also disproportionately on the front lines. Hispanic people form 53% of the agricultural workforce in the U.S., while black and African American individuals make up 30% of nurses. Historic effects of prejudice and discrimination have been aggravated by this global pandemic. A recent ABCUSA press release also highlighted other forms of racial injustice, "...Many Chinese as well as Asian-Americans who are mistakenly perceived as Chinese have been harassed and even physically attacked. The resurgence of xenophobia in this time of coronavirus has no place in the United States or around the world," says the Rev. Florence Li, ABHMS' national coordinator of Asian Ministries, which is part of ABHMS' Intercultural Ministries. "We stand with our Asian-American communities and encourage followers of Jesus Christ to reflect on the Apostle Paul's teaching in I Corinthians 12:13: 'For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free.'"

Discovery Question: What racial and economic disparities have you been made more aware of as a result of COVID-19?

Opportunities

Opportunities for church leaders

1. Creating content. Marie O, Executive Minister of ABC of Wisconsin raises the question of how the church can create content. Should the church be content creators just like athletes and TV personalities? Can we influence culture in a significant way to shape the minds of those influenced by others? Years ago, the World Future Society made a prediction that someday certain professors would become household names, just as many late-night talk show hosts are now. They forecasted a scenario in which every student who takes a beginning economics class would witness several online presentations from the professor best known for brilliantly teaching those concepts, and that this phenomenon would spread to every area of academia. It seems to me that they were predicting new sources of content creation. The question is, "How can the church become one of those sources?"

Opportunity Question: How can pastors and denominational leaders use their social media influence to share the love of Christ and help to create a more caring and compassionate world?

- 2. Crossing boundaries and expanding community.** In recent years, political relationships have become more polarized, spilling over to other organizations such as denominations and local churches. But, since the pandemic, conversations seem less explosive and more productive. The pandemic appears to be creating space for new and improved relationships that cross previously impermeable boundaries. Peter T. Coleman, professor of psychology at Columbia University, explains this as the “political shock wave” scenario, where disruption has the power to move deck chairs and re-set them in new configurations. Is this an opportunity to create more positive relationships and if so, “Why shouldn’t it begin with the church?” Coleman cites studies that have shown that robust relational patterns often become more susceptible to change after some type of major shock destabilizes them. In a study of 850 enduring inter-state conflicts that occurred from 1816 to 1992, he found that more than 75 percent of them ended within 10 years of a major destabilizing shock. We have received a gift to expand our ministries by consorting across silos and strongholds to meet unequalled opportunities in our midst. Smallpox was defeated when Russia and the U.S. worked together; can the U.S. and China do so with COVID-19? What about new connections among denominational leaders?

Opportunity Question: How can pastors and denominational leaders partner in new ways to meet the rising needs of the pandemic?

- 3. Spirituality.** Just as organizations will not be the same after the pandemic, leaders will also need to grow in order to respond to new opportunities. Every event has the capacity to teach us something, but only if we reflect upon it. While there is a temptation, especially among “achievers” and “problem solvers,” to focus upon activities alone during a crisis, at some point, those who do not reflect will miss a timely opening to grow. Spiritual leaders grow best by growing spiritually first. Our relationship with God is not one of our many relationships. It is the foundation upon which all other relationships are based. Many leaders have a new appreciation of the gifts of God, perhaps taken for granted previously. How can that appreciation grow into a deeper relationship? This is a strategic opportunity for personal devotion, worship, meditation, and God-encountering. Cheryl Dudley, executive minister for ABC of Metro New York, asks, “What is God doing among us? Is there something that we have not confessed yet?” Can these confessions lead to greater spiritual growth?

Opportunity Question: What can we draw from each reflective moment to deepen our relationship with God?

- 4. Self-care.** The pandemic is not a two-week occurrence. Its effects may define the current generation and control all others throughout our lifetimes.

Self-care must advance along with the parameters and pace of society. Continuing to perform all of the leadership activities of the past while adding a host of new ones is a prescription for burnout. Margaret Marcuson, ABC pastor and consultant, has been facilitating small groups of pastors to help them think about “addition by subtraction.” She encourages pastors to release some of their anxiety and fear over the future as well as the some of the burden of thinking that the ministry of the church is all up to the pastor. The pruner is a difficult but biblical and necessary role in these times. Many pastoral counselors have also offered their mental health services to pastors and others during the pandemic. During orientations, I warn executives about setting unsustainable initial patterns. The same advice would apply when establishing new patterns after the pandemic. Given the current level of disruption, leaders will find the depth and duration of other growth areas limited by their capacity for self-care.

Opportunity Question: In what ways has the pandemic created new needs and new opportunities for self-care?

Opportunities for congregations

5. Differing opportunities by congregational size. Congregational size, first introduced as a factor by Arlin Routhage in 1983, continues to influence segmented approaches to church vitality and health. Congregations of differing sizes may have differing advantages for worship, mission, and outreach created by COVID-19.

- **Larger congregations** tend to be ahead of the online/streaming innovation curve and have an opportunity to capitalize on that even more as worshipers have grown to appreciate online church activities. Social distancing restrictions, however, may prevent them from full capacity worship for quite some time. Megachurches rose in number when fixed costs related to facilities, staffing, insurance, etc., gave them an economies of scale advantage. That advantage may be more difficult to maintain while limited capacity is in place.
- **Smaller congregations** with ample space now have a use for that space and may have smaller facility costs than large congregations. To the extent that their income can support their facility costs, they have the opportunity to create a more intimate feel when complying with physical distance restrictions. These congregations also tend to respond more quickly to needs within the congregation. In an article from the Alban Weekly on May 22, 2020, Allen T. Stanton writes, “Within a small church, the members tend to each other. If someone is sick, meals are arranged almost spontaneously. If a parishioner needs something from the church but can’t ask, other members will reliably let the pastor know. If someone has a small business, members are sure to shop there. Members of the small church depend on one another -- for connection, for friendship, for

help...with the world locked into physical distancing and isolation, it can be a powerfully sustaining force. It is one of the principal gifts of a small church.” Gerardo Marti of Davidson College and former NLC presenter adds to this topic, “If any churches not only survive but perhaps prosper, it may be the smaller congregations...This size and style of church strikes a particularly strong chord in the Latino community. Their smaller size generally means they have less infrastructure, less fixed debt for capital projects, maintenance and the like, and are less dependent on a higher-up body for financial support. These congregations, already comfortable living on a shoestring, may be best positioned to continue their ministries with a fervor unaffected by COVID-19.”

- **Smaller congregations in large buildings** that have too much ample space (who formerly used less than 15% of their space) will discover that their worshipers are still lost in a huge sanctuary with social distancing in place. The fragility of these congregations may lead to new challenging questions. Will new partnerships form between congregations clamoring for more space and those bellowing for less space? While there are multiple options for struggling congregations, including mergers and satellites, some of these congregations may find the option of being a “buildingless” congregation more attractive as many congregations have proven this possible during the last few months.
- **Other insights** from executive ministers...
 - Soozie Ford, executive minister for ABC of Indiana and Kentucky asks, “Would pastors have to be located in the community if the church gathers solely online?”
 - Al Fletcher, executive minister of ABC of Maine wonders if various congregations could network to provide online worship services?
 - Dale Edwards, executive minister of ABC of Vermont/New Hampshire reports that some of his larger congregations are releasing funds to some of the smaller congregations in the region to help them get through these difficult times.

Opportunity Question: What advantages or disadvantages does your congregation possess by virtue of its size?

6. **Worship.** In a recent survey of ABC congregations, 78% report that COVID-19 has provided new opportunities for worship and 57% report that their worship attendance has increased since the onset of COVID-19. Some have said that they would much prefer online worship to drive-in church, but does it even go further than that? If worshipers are encouraged to wear masks, stand at least six feet apart, avoid hugging one another, not pass an offering plate, and are told to be careful about singing to one other, will online worship continue to be more attractive to some worshipers until such restrictions are lifted? Insights into how to best conduct online worship also seem to be growing. Robin Stoops, executive minister for ABC of Nebraska,

says, "I need something creative than streaming what we used to do," and many churches are delivering. The most participatory worship services seem to include a combination of pre-recorded content such as preaching and music and some elements of live worship such as praises and prayer requests, prayer times, opportunities to give, and live feedback or discussions. Paul Gibson, executive minister of the Great Rivers region says, ""People think church is something that you go to and worship something that you do. The elements of church have changed."

Opportunity Question: How can you continue to provide worship to your new community of online worshippers?

- 7. Minister to new people.** For many congregations, online worship and other activities have attracted a host of new people. Sandra Hasenauer, executive minister of the RGR suggests, "The people who would rather sit at home in their pajamas are in church now." There may also be a host of other online communities that have no connection to a congregation yet. My sister started a discipleship group with her neighborhood watch network. People in Liberia are worshipping weekly with a church in Rhode Island. Opportunities created by increased one to one conversations, coupled with the limitations of the pastor serving every church member have increased discipleship activity in many congregations. There are also new opportunities to expand outreach to those with mental health issues. I noticed in one report that a local pastor has started calling his check-ins with parishioners "phone call visits." Steve Van Ostran, executive minister for the Rocky Mountain Region, suggests that the pandemic should call the church back to its roots, "It seems to me that one of primary responsibilities of the church is to care for the poor, the sick, the abandoned, the disenfranchised, as commanded (or at least commended) by Jesus in the parable of the Sheep and Goats. If my understanding of our history is correct, from the formation of our country the church took responsibility for "the least of these" by creating and running orphanages, hospitals, schools and other of what we today call social service ministries."

Opportunity Question: How can we minister to the people who have connected with you online?

- 8. Leisure and entertainment.** There are many signs of new forms of entertainment as talented musicians entertain urban neighbors, cars parade by persons celebrating birthdays, surprise graduation parties are hosted online, etc. Mary Frances Berry is professor of American social thought, history and Africana Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. She reports that after the disastrous 1918-19 Spanish flu and the end of World War I, many Americans sought carefree entertainment, influenced by new technology, especially vehicles. In previous eras, the church was the center of entertainment. How can congregations be a part of the movement to help persons enjoy life abundantly in new ways?

Opportunity Question: How can congregations take advantage of the hunger for new leisure activities?

- 9. Technology.** One of the consistent keys to using technology is to view it as a tool rather than a program. Tom Wiles, executive minister for the American Baptist Churches of Rhode Island is seeing churches make intelligent selections among available technologies. "I am not hearing a lot of anxiety (related to technology). In the beginning, most churches just tried to find a single platform to use. But, Wednesday night services, Sunday morning services, and Sunday night services historically had different purposes. People are discovering that different online platforms work for different things such as worship, small groups, training, etc. Churches are adapting." Congregations are gaining confidence in digital platforms.

Opportunity Question: What are the best sources of technology for each of your ministry activities?

- 10. Money.** There is a great disparity in how congregations discuss money. Some discuss the topic openly and others treat it as taboo. There are also cultural differences in how people are encouraged to give. According to the Lake Institute's 2019 National Study of Congregations' Economic Practices, African American congregations receive 88% of their revenue through worship services, compared with 78% for all congregations. Some African-American churches instituted drive-by opportunities for offerings during the pandemic. Others utilized crowd sourcing or applied for grants. Many added online giving. No doubt, some of these actions were motivated by survival. Moving forward, there is an opportunity to rethink the theology of giving in light of the global pandemic. Feeling comfortable about how the church leaders view money will help them to have confidence in addressing new forms of giving created by the epidemic.

Opportunity Question: What is your congregation's theology of giving?

Opportunities for identity formation

- 11. Institutional appreciation. Role of central offices.** Just as we have seen evidence that a functioning government is critical to a healthy society, we have seen evidence that a functioning denomination is beneficial to its pastors and congregations. Regional and national organizations have identified needs, produced and shared resources, created space for critical conversations, modeled calmness and concern, and promoted caring and compassion. Has the pandemic rebuilt some of the trust in institutions? We know that trust is created out of caring and competence. Regions seem to be thriving in three institutional areas: (1) attending to the individual emotional and spiritual needs of pastors and church leaders, (2) creating spaces for pastors and church leaders to share ideas with one another and build community, (3) quickly developing or brokering resources to respond immediately to new needs.

Opportunity Question: What is the role of regional and national offices in the future?

- 12. Innovation.** Imagery of sparks and flames has consistently been used to describe what needs to be done to contain COVID-19. Sparks are also a great metaphor for innovation. Sometimes the most difficult aspect of innovation is creating or recognizing the sparks of opportunity among us in order to fan them into innovations. Among many church leaders, the conversations have shifted from sharing technical fixes to dreaming about new possibilities for ministry. One executive minister has noted, "My pastors are asking what have we gained rather than what have we lost? They sense a driving force to a new and different future." This dreaming phase, however, will be short-lived without intentionality. Perhaps congregations need to form "innovation teams" in order to reflect, discern, and identify potential sparks for new mission and ministry.

Opportunity Question: What avenues can your church or organization put into place to recognize the new sparks of opportunity for mission and ministry?

- 13. Decreased resistance to change.** It is much easier to launch innovative practices in a newly planted church than to ask longstanding church members to change their habits and practices. That is because our brains are wired for patterns. Our minds tell us what to expect next and encourage us to go there. Earlier this year in a meeting sponsored by the American Baptist Home Mission Societies, a group of regional and national executives witnessed a video about learning to ride a bicycle, altered in such a manner that turning the handlebars to the left or right now directs the bicycle in the opposite direction. Adults need six to nine months to learn this new skill that a youngster may learn in a few days. Age, however, is not the primary factor. The challenge lies in the difficulty of re-learning an old habit. ABC international missionary Kyle Whitmer says that missionaries are told that they may never reach beyond 65% capacity in developing a new habit or practice. Because the pandemic has forced all of us into new habits and practices, resistance to change is at an all-time low. Act before it disappears.

Opportunity Question: As your congregation identifies potential sparks of innovation, how they can explore and implement new practices and capitalize on those sparks?

- 14. Reprioritization.** In a recent conversation with organizational consultants regarding a revised tool for organizational narratives, one of the consultants said that this is a terrible time to try to get organizations to think about their priorities. The statement was followed by a long pause as we soon realized that this may indeed be the best opportunity in our lifetimes to develop new identities, priorities, mission, and vision. We have all been forced to reflect upon life and death issues, the struggles of so many to get

food on the table, and long-term health. World health experts are claiming that we must develop new habits and practices to survive. It is the sustaining of those activities that ultimately creates a better society. Albert Camus, author of *The Plague*, blames the obliteration of a fictional Algerian town by a pandemic on one thing: consistency. Because the town refused to develop new habits and practices, they dwindled away by death and attrition.

Opportunity Question: How has your organizational identity been reshaped during this global pandemic?

- 15. The value of a multi-systems approach.** One of our executive ministers recently wrote, "Last week I was part of two association pastors' zoom meetings. I see a consistent theme developing as best described as 'distributed,' 'hybrid,' and 'decentralization'. Local pastors are leading adaptive change. As the region executive, there are windows to speak from my experience and offer counsel, but the energy at the local level consults me, and does not rely on me." There are 3 types of distribution systems and all offer opportunities during this global pandemic. First, are centralized systems, which involve common solutions shared from a central office such as the emergency relief offered by MMBB and the webinar from Church Mutual on safely reopening your church building. In the second, decentralized approach, an announcement is made available to the constituents that allows for customization at the local level. Examples of these pandemic responses include the discussion guide for reopening your church building and an REMC document on best practices for pastoral care. Grass roots efforts create the third approach in which ideas are surfaced and distributed through social media, such as churches sharing how to livestream services, pastoral counselors offering their services, and camps sharing online curriculums with one another. Organizations that limit their sources to only one platform will miss opportunities that come from multiple directions.

Opportunity Question: How can your organization take advantage of resources that are available in centralized, decentralized, and distributed fashions?

Dr. C. Jeff Woods