

5 QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE REGATHERING PHYSICALLY AS A CHURCH



TIM FOOT



Early in the morning Joshua and all the Israelites set out from Shittim and went to the Jordan, where they camped before crossing over. After three days the officers went throughout the camp, giving orders to the people: “When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, and the Levitical priests carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before. But keep a distance of about two thousand cubits between you and the ark; do not go near it.” —**Joshua 3:1-4**

Church leaders: some days we wake up inspired and energized by the challenges we face in these times, and other days we wake up wishing things were simpler, normal... the way they used to be. Joshua 3 reminds us that the Israelites faced a similar tyranny of the uncertain. On this particular day, Joshua certainly woke up inspired and focused on the right things, knowing that only God was going to lead them out of their current circumstances. One thing was for sure, they had never been this way before.

Besides the interesting observation that “distancing” was a “thing” back in Old Testament times when it came to the ark of the covenant (with the threat of instant death, I doubt that enforcing it was a problem!), we can certainly relate to the fact that we have “never been this way before.”

Who would’ve thought we’d be here? Church without the physical gathering! At first, we focused on the pivot... we rushed to get online or improve our online experience and we saw attendance and investment spike, but fast forward five months and we’ve got screen and digital fatigue and instead of attendance spiking, new cases of the virus are spiking. All the plans we had come up with are having to be revisited, rethought, and revised.

Lightworkers Media recently asked if Coronavirus was revealing one of America’s biggest idols—certainty.

Most definitely! And that would explain why we’re now struggling in the midst of uncertainty. It’s also why this white paper is not going to be about what we originally intended—best practices when it comes to regathering—because in our research, we haven’t found many that we can all agree on.

So, in uncertain times, what do we do? I would suggest we rely on the wisdom of Proverbs 3:5-6 and start by asking questions, because not only does the quality of your questions determine the quality of your ministry, they unlock information and ultimately lead to wisdom and understanding.

What do we need to be asking when it comes to the big question of WHEN we regather physically? Here are 5 questions to consider:

1. WHAT DO OUR PEOPLE NEED RIGHT NOW?

It can be easy to place so much focus on getting “back” to regathering physically that we miss the fact that we need to move “forward” as a church.

Much like the idol of certainty, perhaps we’ve come to idolize and rely too much on our corporate gatherings.

People need discipleship tools, small group connection, resources to lead their families, snackable content throughout the week, pastoral connection, and care. Your list will most certainly include more than that and be unique to your context. Make a weekly list of what your church’s felt needs are right now.

Now is the time to refocus on other areas of ministry that may have been neglected due to all the focus being on the gathering.

2. WHAT DO OUR PEOPLE NEED TO HEAR?

During uncertain times, people want to know that there's a plan.

Some churches have announced that they won't regather physically in 2020, but that doesn't mean it's right for your church. Neither is deciding to regather right away or continually announcing regathering dates and canceling them (this causes whiplash).

It's critical that you communicate next steps clearly. That could look like communicating the following:

- **"We are watching what happens with schools."**
- **"We are reviewing state requirements that are currently making it prohibitive to meet."**
- **"We are prayerfully considering this with our leadership team and are focusing on being responsible but not fearful."**
- **"We will update you again in two weeks, etc."**

In the meantime, provide clear connection points:

- **"We will be gathering for prayer and worship in our parking lot on these dates."**
- **"We will be launching new small group opportunities."**
- **"Here is a list of small neighborhood gatherings (RSVP required)."**

For those already regathering:

- **Provide updates on the experience and testimonials.**
- **Share learnings with your people.**
- **Continue to stay focused on your online experience.**

3. WHAT CAN WE CELEBRATE?

The apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians while in chains in prison. That's a whole different kind of quarantine, but a quarantine nonetheless! In the opening of his letter, he declares:

As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear. —Philippians 1:13–14

Because of Paul's chains...the believers became confident in Christ and proclaimed the Gospel without fear.

Because of this pandemic... what?

The answer to that question is the answer to what we can celebrate!

The advice here is simple: answer that question and CELEBRATE... because we could all use some good news. Here are some ways to communicate good news to your people:

- **"The church has started streaming online and reached exponentially more people."**
- **"We've been using technology to proclaim the Gospel in new and innovative ways."**
- **"We've been reminded that the church is not a building but a body."**
- **"Our campuses aren't Plan A for advancing and growing the Kingdom... Plan A is ME and YOU!"**

4. HOW DO WE KEEP SERVING?

Whether we're gathering physically or digitally, God's command to "love our neighbors" stays the same.

Start by identifying two groups within your church family: those who can help and those who need help. Many of us paid attention to this early on in the quarantine, but in the shuffle of focusing on the urgent, we likely fell into rhythms that didn't allow for much proactivity when it came to serving others.

Serving people can be as simple as giving them a phone call. You may have done this early on, but maybe it's time to check in again.

Consider ways you can serve your community, first responders, educators navigating the school year, and those who live alone or struggle with mental illness during this time.

Our gatherings should not only provide an opportunity for others to worship, experience, and learn about God, but serve as one of the places where Christ-followers who are living missionally can go to be refilled for another week of living missionally. Let's make it our goal to have plenty to celebrate when it comes to how we're serving and living missionally when we gather online or physically!

5. HOW DO WE KEEP GROWING?

The early church in the book of Acts was unstoppable in the face of incredible challenges. They were also nimble and responsive. Churches that realize this is a “new day,” ask the right questions around ministry shifts, and realign resources to adjust to these shifts will grow in this season.

What have you lost that you don't need to find again? What do you need to welcome back? How do you use this crisis to realign? If nothing is changing, you may be left behind.

If you're tight-fistedly clinging to the hope that things will one day be normal again, loosen that grip and turn it into an open-handed posture.

Paul reminds us in 2 Timothy 1:7 that *“God didn't give us a spirit of fear but of faith, love, power and a sound mind.”* That's a great filter for leadership in troubled times.

Strong vision is something people rally around. It brings change, clarity, alignment—and ultimately, growth. Healthy things grow, and healthy leaders grow healthy churches. Start with an inventory of your own heart and leadership.

In the midst of these uncertain times, provide clarity where possible and make decisions around things that you can control. Recently, retail giant Walmart announced that they would be closed on Thanksgiving Day this year. This sent all kinds of messages and was a show of strong leadership that gave staff and customers one small thing they could count on that communicated care and values.

Making staffing decisions around fresh vision, online ministry, and discipleship is what is needed right now. The “blimp of change” is in the air, so get your binoculars out and take a look, then grow and change accordingly. As a mentor once told me, “When you can see the blimp without the binoculars, it's too late!”

LET'S CHANGE AND GROW IN THIS SEASON

Uncertainty is unavoidable. We are not in control and we never have been! But we can know that Jesus is with us wherever we are right now, and trusting Him in every moment is the best way to lead our people forward.

Figuring out when to regather physically is just one of the many decisions in front of us right now. How to structure things and grow moving forward is an even bigger one—and the answers are as different and unique as God's call on each church. We have to align vision, mission, staffing, and resources toward the version of our church that is emerging out of all we've been experiencing and will continue to experience in 2020.

Keep humbly asking questions, because as church leaders, we were never meant to have the answers without depending upon and seeking God's leading. Then, as Joshua reminds us, "you will know which way to go since you have never been this way before" (Joshua 3:4).

Finally, may we believe and hope, with humble confidence and strong leadership, in the words Joshua tells the people in the very next verse:

"Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you." —**Joshua 3:5**

