



**IF YOUR CHURCH IS CLOSED... BE THE CHURCH**

A PASTOR'S GUIDE TO GROWING CHURCHES AT HOME

PETER ROENNFELDT

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# WHAT IS IT LIKE FOR YOU, A PASTOR?

The closing of church buildings has not suddenly given you more time and space to relax with family, read the books waiting on your desk, explore the offerings of YouTube or finish your post-graduate study. No, it has been just the opposite.

Your church is now scattered to multiple households. Your task has just become incredibly complex.

So while some are reflecting on the opportunities for a renewal of spiritual interest by members and neighbours—and even celebrating new interest by some toward God, the gospel and prophecy, with the opportunities presented—most pastors are reporting long hours and being stretched to the limit.

The tasks have shifted and multiplied:

- Updating contact details and databases.
- Setting up virtual small groups.
- Organising and doing visitation by phone or online, perhaps using FaceTime or Zoom conferencing.
- Providing support for grieving families who are organising traumatic funerals with reduced numbers able to attend—creating enormous stress.
- Conducting fast-tracked weddings.

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- Counselling families and couples through the traumas of life-change and isolation.
- Preparing the technology for online teaching or preaching—while being sure of meeting government regulations on numbers and venues, and at the same time preparing messages with quality content.
- Organising Zoom Bible classes—and encouraging participants.
- Arranging increased community support services, such as food and emergency care packages.

Your days are spent on the phone, counselling distressed families and communities. Like their non-member work-mates and colleagues, members are losing their jobs and walking away from their factories and offices. Others are in the invidious position of sacking staff, including workers who have been loyal friends for years.

Job losses are rising daily. Our members are in the social-service queues and on government websites desperately seeking support. Many who have been faithful in giving are seeing livelihoods created over decades, now in tatters.

You don't need to be told to give more pastoral care by phone or social media. You cannot escape the stream of distressing calls from anxious members, nor escape your own stress at not being physically present to support and counsel.

As well as ministering to others, you as pastors must give attention to organising your own families for current or possible lockdown. The kids are home from school, some spouses have lost their employment, and family and financial stresses are rising.

For how long is this current situation sustainable? How long will you as a pastor be able to juggle this complexity—for which

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most are not prepared—delivering high-quality live-streaming with great teaching, while at the same time building a totally new infrastructure for member care, virtual small groups, disciple-making and movement-building, using vastly different communication approaches?



# A BRIDGE TO THE OTHER SIDE

There is every indication that this pandemic will affect us all for some time—six months is what we are being told. Recognising the enormous social and economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis, national leaders are endeavouring to ensure there is a bridge to the other side for society. As pastors, we must also be in this for the long haul. It is important that we put in place sustainable systems and processes.

When it's all over—whatever that means!—it might be that multiple households of faith could be the new normal for some of our church members. However, there will still be many who will want to return to worship together in a church building. This will be important to many believers, as well as their friends.

How effective we are in being church at home now will have huge implications for our churches when we get to the other side. This means—in the midst of the myriad things to do—we need to take a deep breath, reflect, prioritise and follow a plan.

# WHAT MIGHT CHURCH LOOK LIKE NOW?

First, let me say, keep it simple.

In his excellent article “Unprecedented”, Travis Manners, senior pastor of Morphett Vale Church in South Australia, writes, “We can learn a lot from how the early Christians reacted during times of plague.”<sup>1</sup> Their response was informed and motivated entirely by Jesus’ life, teachings and sacrificial love.

**Jesus’ methods**, so effective in the 1st century, are incredibly relevant in our 21st century. It “is the best place to start.”<sup>2</sup> This is not a time for panic, but the time for faithfulness.<sup>3</sup>

Is God nudging us back into the community to again *be* the church? It is sometimes easier to turn to the institutional church for short-term answers, but Jesus’ methods guide us to sustainable, missional solutions.

**Jesus’ vision** defined the course of the early church in cultivating God’s kingdom movement—in extreme circumstances—and must define ours.

**His mission has not changed.** The great commission—and our mission—is not changed by a global crisis, nor by the distress and disorientation with which we struggle. Jesus said,

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*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:18–20).*

Whatever we face, He is with us *always*. This is reality—and a great promise. And His vision and mission do not change.

# A PASTOR'S PRACTICAL GUIDE

The five phases of Jesus' life and movement-building provide a practical guide for doing ministry and being church in challenging times. Using these as a frame for prioritising and planning, we will explore:

1. Preparation needed now.
2. Foundations that endure.
3. Participation as a vital factor for pastoral care and growth.
4. Leadership multiplication—to survive and thrive.
5. Movement multiplication—toward God's vision.

At first, this might seem overwhelming—just more to do—but be assured, if you take some simple steps, investing time and energy now, the path ahead is going to be less stressful and much more satisfying.

## **1. Preparation needed now.**

Jesus prepared for His ministry, and it is critical that we pause to prepare, plan and prioritise. His development was wholistic—physical, mental, spiritual and social—as must be ours, that of our members and all disciples we make and multiply.

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It is essential that you stop and take a short time to plan. Jesus spent 30 years—but, of course, you are not entirely unprepared—so taking a few hours or days now to plan your path ahead makes sense. Luke’s statement about Jesus’ time of preparation—“Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men” (Luke 2:52)—suggests priorities and provides a guide.

### PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

First, be wise. Pastors, you have been drafted suddenly into an overwhelming new role that demands radically different ways of doing ministry. You will cope better mentally and physically if you attend to some basics:

- **Your daily routine.** Because of the nature of our roles, unless we have been working in a denominational office, our time has been self-managed. Before COVID-19, with requirements for social distancing and isolation, we had reasonably defined parameters—perhaps family prayer at 6.45, breakfast at 7, spouse out the door to work at 7.30, children off to school at 8, all home in the afternoon, and you out most evenings—around which we built times for worship, study, visitation and other ministry tasks. But this has all changed. The routine has been broken. No-one is out the door to childcare, school or work. Everyone is home, with no break in sight—and you know you must minister. The phone is ringing, while the family demands and requires attention.

*Suggestions only:*

1. Start each day at a set time. Spend time in prayer, with God and His Word.
2. Maintain a regular exercise regime. If the regulations allow—walk, jog, run or ride. If not, exercise in the

garage or, if there are stairs in your home, walk up and down.

3. Eat regularly and drink plenty of water. Keep to regular meal times with your family, have a jug of water on your desk—this forces some exercise as well!—and don't snack all the time, just because you are home and near the fridge.
4. Dress for work. It improves our mental attitudes and feelings if we come to our ministry tasks well-groomed and dressed professionally.
5. Maintain the routine of regular family worship times—maybe at breakfast time and after the evening meal.
6. Ensure that you set aside times for family and establish set hours when you will focus on work, study and research. Emergencies interrupt, but not all calls are urgent.
7. Plan to break from the phone or computer at least mid-morning and mid-afternoon for a “coffee break” with your spouse.

- **Your work space.** While I worked from an office for more than 20 years, I have always had a well-equipped home office. When renting or building a home, we have chosen to have the study situated near the front door. Not all have had that convenience or luxury and you can't necessarily arrange it now, but, if you have not done it before, organise your study or workspace. This will also do wonders for your mental health. Most will be up-to-speed on this, but our circumstances have changed so dramatically that a few suggestions might be in order.

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### *Suggestions only:*

1. As much as possible in your home circumstances, arrange your study as a professional office space, in a quiet area away from the main family room of the home. You'll need a desk or table, a supportive chair, good lighting, and your computer, internet access, printer and books.
  2. Maintain an open-door policy. This is a personal preference, but I have always kept my door open for my spouse and children—and now grandchildren—to visit when they wish. However, they know and respect my study as my place of work.
- **Your weekly routine.** This is going to be difficult. With everyone isolated at home, one day will flow into another. Church members do not know your boundaries or routines, so calls will come at any time. You must plan your schedule first:

### *Suggestions only:*

1. One day each week is a family day. This day should be free of pressing phone calls and planning. You need to relax, play board (or computer) games with the kids, engage more with your spouse, help around the house, clean up the garage and fix the garden—maybe even growing more vegetables, if you have the space.
2. Sabbath time. When church is held in buildings, this gift from God is frequently over-burdened with meetings. It is God's gift to all people—blessed time, family time, worship time, restoration time, rest time, social time and community time—a weekly

reminder of the new covenant, that there is no work that we can do to save ourselves. We must remember this time in our present crisis environment. You will not save your church by rushing to have complete control. Plan for this to be a special day for your members in their “Church at Home”—and for you in yours.

3. Be proactive. Take control of your schedule. You must step back from the pressing and urgent, and engage with the most important. Set aside time when you will determine the agenda, including calling key people in your church—not necessarily the elected leaders—and community, who can make a real difference.
4. Inform your networks and church members of your schedule. Every call does not need to come to you as the pastor. So get the message out:
  - a. This is when and who you can call, for the information you need.
  - b. This is my schedule, for example:

Available: 4 days: 8 am–4 pm and 7–9 pm

Other days:

1 day: pastor's time for study and preparation

1 day: pastor's free and family time

Sabbath: for Bible classes, worships and  
virtual visitation

*Note: Always be available at other times for emergencies.*

Remember: you, your family, your church and community are in this for the long haul—it might be six months or longer. Be ready



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to adapt to the changing environment, but plan your weekly routine and let all your networks know.

### SPIRITUAL AND SOCIAL WELLBEING

It is critical that you care for yourself. You will be sacrificing continually for others—day and night—so be proactive in getting aside like your Saviour, to be refilled and refreshed by the Spirit. It is important that you prioritise your own support systems—your social network, care and accountability processes.

- **Your social networks.** Regularly phone, FaceTime and Zoom friends and family. Connect more with your immediate neighbours. In this way—while maintaining all the rules of social distancing—relax with people, build new friendships and become more socially engaged.
- **Your care.** Be proactive in reaching out for spiritual, social and professional care and encouragement. Call your fellow pastors or join a Zoom catch-up or conference with other pastors, for care and ideas.
- **Your accountability processes.** If not before, you have instantly become a phone counsellor to many distressed and vulnerable people. You will be providing encouragement, counsel and advice. Ensure you have professionals with whom to debrief on any counsel you might give, and remember, most of us as pastors are not trained to be counsellors. We must know our limitations.

*Suggestions only:*

1. List professionals. Have their names and contact details on your desk and refer people on for family, family violence or grief counselling, financial advice and unemployment support.

2. Call your fellow pastor friends. You know the people with whom you can be vulnerable and safe. Put appointments in your calendar and call them regularly to process what you and your family are struggling with.
3. Identify accountability professionals—people with whom you can debrief after counselling distressed people.
4. Keep in weekly contact with your local church leaders. Again, you know who you can share openly and securely with. This is a time for deep friendships, vulnerability and support.
5. Deepen your relationships with pastors of other denominations and mission agencies. They are facing the same challenges and understand exactly where you are coming from. Most will be delighted to be in frequent contact and will appreciate mutual encouragement, support and ideas.

With social contacts, neighbours, fellow pastors, local church leaders and clergy of other community churches, ensure you spend time praying together to support each other's spiritual and social wellbeing.

## **2. Foundations that endure.**

During the 18-month-long second phase of His ministry—from His baptism to His return through Samaria to Galilee—Jesus lay down the foundations for an enduring, sustainable and multiplying ministry. These foundations were spiritual and facilitated movement-building.

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### HOLY SPIRIT P.O.W.E.R.

Our ministry in difficult times must be built on a firm foundation, and the key principles of Jesus' ministry represented by the acronym Holy Spirit P.O.W.E.R. are enduring:<sup>4</sup>

**Holy Spirit** dependence, established upon

**Prayer**

**O**bedience to the Father's kingdom agenda

**W**ord—time spent in His inspired Word each day

**E**xalting the Father

**R**elationships—intentionally fostered

What devotional routine have you established personally, as a family or in the household in which you are isolated?

If you have not yet chosen a devotional journey for the next weeks and months—or you have been too busy to think about it—you might choose to read:

- The gospels—walking again through Jesus' life-story.
- The book of Acts—reliving the Spirit's activity among the first believers.
- The New Testament epistles—re-engaging with the apostles' vision

Pastors, don't try to work through the next months without these spiritual and relational foundations firmly established.

### FOUNDATIONS FOR MOVEMENT-BUILDING

It is also time to rethink the foundations of our ministry activities. If we don't, we are in danger of burnout. However, if we get simple movement principles in place—and hold to them—we will

gain perspective, keep balance and see our local churches come out of this shutdown healthy and reproducing.

Essential movement principles include:

- Reliance on Jesus, not buildings.
- Working with key people—in *relational streams*.
- Cultivating simple missional churches of “2 or 3”—so that anyone can do it.
- Keeping all ministry simple and reproducible.
- No-cost ministries—or zero-dollar thinking.
- Handing it on—and getting out of the way.
- Participation by all for growth.
- Affirming spiritual giftedness.
- Multiplying movement leadership.
- Planting and multiplying *mission hubs*, not *mission stations*.

This seems quite a list—but let us break it down and lift the burden from you as a pastor. First, think about Jesus. When He launched into this foundation phase of His ministry, He first deconstructed dependence on the physical temple building, drawing attention to Himself as the One who heals and forgives (see John 2:13–25).

Then, although the information is limited, He clearly made ministry, disciple-making and even baptism so simple that many could participate. By the time He left Judea for Galilee, He was baptising more than John the Baptist—but it was His new disciples (whoever they were, but certainly not the 12 at that stage!) who were multiplying and baptising new disciples (see John 3:22; 4:1, 2).

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*Movements follow systems—and we must too.*

*Suggestions only:*

You might already have these people in place. Some might need reskilling for their new roles and responsibilities. But the point is, do not do these tasks yourself—enlist key people to get the systems in place and cultivate the foundational principles of Holy Spirit P.O.W.E.R. among all your key team people:

1. **Secretaries** (church clerk role)—to update membership databases. There are likely to be secretaries (both unemployed and retired) among your church membership. Choose one to enlist the help of others to follow up their *relational streams* and get together an updated membership database. Ensure privacy laws are adhered to in recording names, email addresses and contact numbers.
2. **Member care coordinator**—an elder-type person who will coordinate member care or the virtual visitation program for all members. This person will coordinate a team of elders and deacons to:
  - Assign each visitation person to three households with up to 10 people.
    - As much as possible, they should visit in their *relational streams*.
    - Pastor, when you know the people to be visited, make a phone call, FaceTime or Zoom to introduce their virtual visitor.
  - Encourage each to call people once each week.

—Listen to people's concerns, encourage and always pray with them.

—Refer to the **Member care coordinator** and **pastor** if further professional counselling is needed.

- Be alert to families, homes and individuals at risk of mental health issues and family violence, and seek advice from professional agencies.
  - Give careful attention to care for the disinherited and marginalised, including young adults, creatives, migrants and new disciples, and encourage them to reach their *relational streams* and peers, motivating them to be leaders.
  - Ensure all doing virtual visitation keep a record in a shared online diary of when members are visited, and let all members know that these calls are their pastoral visitation.
3. **Family care coordinator**—to research and share practical ideas for fun and activities with mums and dads who are at home with kids:
- Keep **Member care coordinator** and team up to date with ideas.
  - Share directly with families, including single-parent families.
4. **Online worship coordinator**—to (1) organise a team for online worship, and (2) have a team to get information out with options for worship services for all members—remembering that some are online, some use TV, and others want to read their Bibles.

5. **Stewardship coordinator**—to foster e-giving of tithes and offerings, and needs-based giving for neighbours and vulnerable people, with information and resources on how and where to give.
6. **Sabbath School Bible class coordinator**—to support a team who can facilitate multiple Bible class opportunities. Each Bible class or group to be encouraged to provide resources and take responsibility for their group members and their wider communities—keeping in mind that some will not engage with a Zoom Bible class.

Provide information on:

- How to access weekly Zoom or FaceTime Bible classes that they might like to join.
- Where to get Bible-reading guides online and make all aware of available resources for all age groups:

Resources: Quarterly Sabbath School Bible Reading Guides and videos for adults and children: <[www.following-jesus.com/resources/](http://www.following-jesus.com/resources/)>.

7. **Small-groups coordinator** (for evangelism and disciple-making)—to encourage all members to connect with neighbours by phone to meet needs, encourage and pray over the phone. People are open to prayer with those they trust, as well as doing *Discovery Bible Reading* by phone, Facetime or Zoom.

Pastors, it is not the idea that you do all these things yourselves. Many will be ready to step up and help—meaning you will work

with seven to 10 key people each week to bring the data and planning together. It should not be more!

At this time, many are immobilised and don't know what to do. Some have stopped functioning in the usual ways and will appreciate being engaged and given value. Even for worship times, some are internet surfing, not engaged with any one worship event. They are struggling to settle. Live-streaming or watching a televised worship program is not fostering wellbeing for them.

Pastor, it is the movement team leader's role to give attention to the important—not the urgent. In the next phases of movement-building, we will briefly note how other essential principles enable you in your new role to pastor the life of multiple household churches.

### **3. Participation as a vital factor for pastoral care and growth.**

Member care is of critical concern for all pastors and local churches. Denominational leaders are rightly urging that the phone visitation of members be intensified, as many members are suffering loss, loneliness and despair in the current COVID-19 crisis.

Some have told me that pastors are stretched to the limit. Their days are filled with phone counselling, receiving calls from and calling members in crisis. But why are we doing this? Is this truly providing care for our members?

Jesus' approach to care and building up believers was radically counter-intuitive. His method for all new disciples was involvement, and this is still important for all members today.

Daily routines have been thrown out the window. Many of our members, as well as those in the community, are lost as to



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what to do. We feel trapped. Some are glued to screens—with frustration levels, as well as fear or even anger, increasing—and the isolation has just begun. Most are not prepared to be shut up inside for months.

Your **Member care coordinator** and team can research and share ideas for activities for single people isolated on their own, as well as for couples and families. Members can be encouraged to share practical ideas with their friends and neighbours.

Participation provides member care for the recipients, as well as for those involved in meeting the needs of others.

During His third phase of ministry—the participation and equipping Galilean phase—Jesus worked with a small team of four to six people. He showed them how to live and do ministry—modelling and multiplying. And this is what we as pastors are best to do. After laying solid foundations (Phase 2), we are now ready to build with participation (Phase 3).

### *Suggestions only:*

1. It is time to focus on the seven to 10 people that you have already identified as leaders (see Foundations).
2. Don't be tempted to do it all.
3. One of their key roles will be suggesting activities and ministry ideas to all members to keep them engaged with life—mentally, physically, spiritually and socially.
4. Equip others—agree on what they will do, give them responsibility, release them and check back on progress at agreed times.
5. Your role will now be chief encourager.

6. Get updates from your key people—don't go past them.
7. Keep an eye on the big picture.
8. Watch your people grow.

Of course, pastor, you can just continue doing it all. You can try to control everything. But your church is already out of your control. Your churches have become multiple *household* churches. If you do not shift to being a movement-leader, you will be overwhelmed.

This is a time when following Jesus' example, frames and models will be most effective—and will preserve your sanity and wellbeing.

#### **4. Leadership multiplication—to survive and thrive.**

Facing a crisis resulting from the effectiveness of His third phase of ministry—equipping and multiplying disciple-makers—Jesus shifted to this fourth phase: leadership multiplication. With the Pharisees and Herodians plotting to kill Him, Jesus spent the night in prayer, before coming out onto the Galilean hills the next day to choose His 12 apostles.

Just as Jesus now focused His time and energy on equipping this leadership team for multiplication—drawing them close to Himself for instruction and experience—so you will be wise to reduce the spread of your ministry and focus on a dedicated team. It is time to intentionally equip and release your key leadership multiplication personnel.

The key principle of Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" was sacrifice, demonstrated in loving enemies (see Matthew 5:43–45). Jesus broadened the disciples' vision and multiplied the districts in

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which He worked from three to seven regions. The movement was gaining momentum and it called for sacrificial leadership.

*Suggestions only:*

1. It is time to build the level of sacrifice in your team—by example. Jesus taught leaders, “If you love only those who love you, what good is that?” (Matthew 5:46, NLT). While balancing self-care and complying with social-distancing requirements, we are not to become household-church-centred—but also find ways to reach others, to share God’s grace widely.
2. All leaders and members are to be disciple-makers. Follow Jesus’ example—He led the movement but was always a disciple-maker.
  - All were to be baptised with the Holy Spirit.
  - All believers were equipped with the same Spirit to do what He had been doing.
  - All believers were equipped with two truths: (1) the assurance of salvation, and (2) the anointing of the Spirit.
3. All leaders are to intentionally multiply *household* churches.
  - Identify and follow *relational streams*—making disciples in all “nations” (*ethne*) (see Matthew 28:16–20).
  - Identify key people in each *relational stream*—and work with them as *natural leaders* (see Luke 10:5–7).

4. Cast the vision of reaching more unreached people and new territories. Jesus worked all the territories or districts of the region—and this is to be our vision (see Matthew 28:16–20; Acts 1:4–8).
5. Equip selected team members to replicate and multiply your leadership.

## 5. Movement multiplication—toward God's vision

Following Calvary—Jesus' death and resurrection—and Pentecost—His Spirit's anointing and presence—the Christian movement multiplied dramatically. Jesus' preparation, foundations, participatory equipping and leadership development (Phases 1 to 4) were solid. For this next phase, additional key ideas included:

- Jerusalem was a *mission hub*—not a *mission station* (see Acts 1:4–8).
- The *oikos* (household) in *relational streams* would be church (see Acts 2:41–47).
- There was to be *no place left* where the gospel was not known (see Acts 1:4–8; Romans 15:14–24; compare Matthew 28:16–20).

This is the bigger picture. It is God's vision, the vision that inspired the apostles. It is aspirational—where we are headed. Phase 5 challenges not only pastors but denominational administrators to be visionary movement leaders.

*Suggestions only:*

1. With your local team leaders, reflect on where your *household churches* fit into this movement vision.

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2. Set aside time to work systematically through the epistles—perhaps with *Following the Apostles' Vision*—to look back on movement multiplication principles. This will be a life- and ministry-changing journey.
3. Identify where you and your team members are gifted to work most effectively as movement leaders:<sup>5</sup>
  - Seed-sowers and disciple-makers—everyone at all levels.
  - Planters—equip and gather new seed-sowers into new *households of faith*.
  - Multipliers—planters who equip and release a network of planters.
  - Multiplication trainers—experienced planters who equip other multipliers.
  - Movement catalysts—those who cultivate the broad movement to reach every unreached population segment or region.

At the end of the gospels, Jesus released others to take His movement forward—getting out of the way, but remaining present by His Spirit. By the close of Acts, the apostle Paul released others to multiply the movement—and was taken out of the way, with the Spirit remaining to continue His work.

Pastors, we must not hinder, but rather facilitate, God's movement. It is a difficult time for all. Like us as local pastors, our denominational and mission agency leaders are struggling to keep on top of things. It is not time for us to undermine or criticise. Rather, the current crisis provides the perfect opportunity to rethink and restructure our ministries and

movement activities with our local team leaders to multiply *households of faith*—and to see our churches as part of the wider movement of God into the future.

# HOUSEHOLD CHURCHES

As pastors we must be sensitive to the loss and disorientation many are feeling with church buildings closed. We know that going to a church building for a worship service was not what happened in New Testament times—that all the early churches were small household (*oikos*) churches meeting in homes. But knowing this does not entirely alleviate the sense of loss, distress or disorientation caused by the sudden closing of our church buildings today—even for you as a pastor.

In fact, to be reminded of it now can be a little like rubbing salt into the wound!

Going to church has been a lifetime commitment, duty and practice for many of our church members, and it is disorienting to be isolated from the fellowship of believers. Going to a church, enjoying worship music, praising God, listening to a sermon, catching up with friends, and enjoying fellowship around a shared lunch has been a settled routine, and the closing of the church building is a major disruption.

For some elderly members, going to church has been their weekly outing—to get out of the house and to spend time with others. For many young adults, church has been a place to connect socially. For those in difficult home circumstances, it has been a lifeline, providing support, encouragement and

warmth from fellow believers. Perhaps church was a chance to enjoy a safe, peaceful place—to experience God’s embrace with some who understood. For many, having church closed is a disaster.

It is especially distressing for those brought up in Catholic and Orthodox countries or raised in those traditions, as well as many African and Pacific believers, and those members taught that the church building is a sanctuary where God dwells. And, for those from countries where churches were closed by government decree, there might be a fearful sense of *déjà vu*, stirring up reminders of severe oppression.

Having their church building closed can be difficult, disorienting, a disaster—and even feel like being shut out from God. It can challenge faith.

## Multiple churches of “2 or 3” (a little ecclesiology)

Just months before His crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus used the word *church*—meaning a *gathering*, a word without architectural, political or religious connotations at that time. It’s worth reading Matthew 16:13–21 again. Our church is:

- His church.
- He is the foundation.
- The *gates of hades* won’t destroy His people (but buildings won’t last!).
- He has given us the keys of the kingdom (see verse 19)—the good news of His death and salvation (see verse 21)—and we can take those keys to open heaven for our families and colleagues. What we open will be open!



## IF YOUR CHURCH IS CLOSED

With church being people, there will be tensions. So the next time Jesus spoke of church He outlined how to address conflicts. In that context, speaking of church, Jesus said:

For where two or three come together in my name,  
there am I with them (Matthew 18:20).

The “two or three”—the basic unit of the Christian church—are of great value to Jesus. They are a representation of our Triune God. And what an amazing promise, with such encouragement and assurance. By His Spirit, Jesus is with us and our people—in our homes, with our households.

Here is a description of the church, soon after it was birthed by the Holy Spirit on Pentecost day: “Those who believed what Peter said were *baptised* and added to the church” (Acts 2:41, NLT). The believers, described as the *church*,

“devoted themselves to *the apostles’ teaching* [Jesus is alive!], and *fellowship* [with each other and the Spirit], sharing in *the Lord’s Supper* and *prayer*” (Acts 2:42, NLT).

They “*shared everything* they had . . . with those in need.” At that time, they could also gather in the temple courts but they “*met in homes for the Lord’s Supper*, and *shared their meals* with great joy and generosity—all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people.” And “there was a *deep sense of awe*”—with *many miracles* (see Acts 2:43–47, NLT).

Each household church will be very different. By the time we get to Acts 4, there were possibly as many as 1000 *household churches* in Jerusalem—5000 men plus women and children, so maybe 15,000 to 20,000 believers meeting in homes with 10 to 20 people in each (see Acts 4:4).

In the only other window into what was actually happening in those New Testament worship gatherings, Paul’s emphasis was on

orderly participation for the strengthening of the church—each contributing with a song, inspiration, encouragement or insight from God (see 1 Corinthians 14:26; compare 11:1–14:40).

Today, because of the necessary regulations placed on us, in most cases, church—or *gatherings*—will be very small. Church might be just one isolated person and God, with perhaps phone, FaceTime or Zoom contact with others. And as pastors, we might now be overseeing dozens (even hundreds) of these *households of faith*.

But in these New Testament *households*, we see key elements of church:

- Belief and baptism.
- Devotion to the apostles' teaching and prayer.
- The Lord's Supper.
- Fellowship and food.
- Generous support among themselves and for others.
- A deep sense of God's presence—and miracles.

Each of these are essential qualities of church, and how we foster them as pastors, denominational leaders and mission agencies has implications for God's people and movement multiplication. We will look at these in four areas:

## 1. Basics: *Discovery Bible Reading and Conversational Prayer*

Encourage all your members to download the bookmarks for *Discovery Bible Reading* (available in various languages) and *Conversational Prayer*, which provide essential self-explanatory tools for household worship and Bible classes:

Go to <[www.following-jesus.com/resources/](http://www.following-jesus.com/resources/)> for:

- *Discovery Bible Reading* and *Conversational Prayer* bookmarks.
- A video (2.5 minutes) and a PDF explaining how to do *Discovery Bible Reading*.

## 2. Simple, interactive worship that anyone can do

What could a simple, reproducible worship time at home look like? Some might wish to watch a Bible lesson or worship service online or on religious television. But many don't have access to that technology or know how to use it. Others want something more personal and possibly interactive. For them, screen-time church does not work.

From observation and discussions in the wider evangelical press, we are aware of some downsides of streaming and television church. We may not agree with it all, but it can disconnect members from regular attendance and foster further isolation.

As well as providing Zoom Bible classes and streamed church, could this be our opportunity to help our people again read their Bibles and find quiet for their hearts and souls in Jesus?

### *Suggestions—for Bible classes*

Encourage participation in a weekly Bible class, with resource materials for adults as well as children, teens and young adults. For links to the latest videos, reading guides, summaries and materials for all generations—adults, families and children, go to <[www.following-jesus.com/resources/](http://www.following-jesus.com/resources/)>.

This time of discussion could be 30–45 minutes.

Of course, some *households* might simply opt for a blended time of worship—integrating a number of features with *Discovery Bible Reading* for all.

*Suggestions—for worship*

Keep it simple, enjoyable and easy to do so that anyone can facilitate worship. Involve each person. Together choose a plan—or mix it up:

1. **Bible reading**—using *Discovery Bible Reading*

Read the Psalms to find messages of encouragement, hope and salvation in these distressing times. Or choose *one Bible book* to read over the coming weeks—the Gospel of Mark is a great place to start.

Follow the *World Changers Bible Reading Guide*—58 biblical themes, covering 28 doctrines plus 30 themes exploring assurance, spiritual growth and sharing—with training videos. Links at <[www.following-jesus.com/resources/](http://www.following-jesus.com/resources/)>.

2. **Read the Gospels, the book of Acts or the epistles**—using *Discovery Bible Reading*

Go to <[www.following-jesus.com](http://www.following-jesus.com)> for links for background reading and videos.

- Reading the Gospels is a transformational experience. Journey through the story of Jesus in sequence, reading through the Gospels. Plan to read one guide of *Following Jesus* each week, and follow through the life story of Jesus, discussing, sharing and applying what you discover.

## IF YOUR CHURCH IS CLOSED

- Reading Acts is an inspiring journey. Experience the excitement of the early church. Plan to read a chapter of *Following the Spirit* each week, as you work through Acts, discussing, sharing and applying what you learn.
- Reading the New Testament epistles offers a challenging but refreshing experience. Rediscover what the early church was like. Plan to read one epistle each week, with the relevant chapter of *Following the Apostles' Vision*.

### *Suggestions—for those isolated together*

1. Plan a simple breakfast, brunch or lunch together—with something special.
2. Agape Lord's Supper. Have flat bread and grape juice on the table to celebrate the Lord's Supper as an *Agape Meal* together—something all early believers did to keep their faith on-the-path-of-life during times of trouble.
3. Set times work best. It could be 10 am—and plan for how long this time will be. Don't go on and on—don't weary your household—but plan this worship time for each week.
4. Connect with others via social media. Use FaceTime, Zoom or phone to connect with others, inviting them to join your worship time online. Many will be needing encouragement and support.
5. Plan to give an offering. There is much for which to thank God. Continue returning tithes and offerings

to your churches through e-giving to support your pastors and foster unity, and also collect to support vulnerable neighbours. Phone neighbours to see what is needed, purchase the items and let them know when you will leave them at their door. Look after those around you.

6. Music. It is great if you have some—either live or streamed—but don't feel it is absolutely necessary. And if you can't sing, try anyway—or maybe read the lyrics of a hymn or song.

### 3. Generous service for others

In the New Testament, *households of faith* were known for their generosity.

*Suggestions only:*

Pastors, encourage your **Stewardship coordinators** to ensure all *household churches*:

1. Understand e-giving for the return of tithes and offerings.
2. Are informed of the needs of all members, including those in other *households*.
3. Identify the needs of their colleagues, neighbours and communities—and collect offerings to purchase supplies and meet those needs directly.
4. Are encouraged to participate in supporting food pantries and delivery as they are able and permitted by social distancing and isolation rules in their states and regions.

## 4. Lord's Supper, baptism and anointing —practical suggestions

These three practices—the Lord's Supper, baptism and anointing—are essential to church life. In fact, church finds identity in the meaning of these tangible services and they have special meaning in times of crisis. They were foundational to the early church and key in all movements of Christian faith.

It is not that we are saved by baptism, but it is the urgent, obedient and joyful response of the saved. Nor does eating the Lord's Supper save us, but it is participation with the Lord who has saved. And, in prayer with laying on of hands and anointing with oil, we claim the promises of God's grace and healing presence.

In these services, new disciples testify to their salvation, and we as pastors and believers find identity, assurance and hope. So, although challenging, we must find ways to continue to offer all three to those coming to faith and to sustain those of faith—even in difficult times.

Aware of church policies, it is not my intention to be definitive but to suggest possibilities to ensure we are faithful and our members blessed.

*Note: Each suggestion must be adapted to the current government advice, requirements and regulations to contain the spread and impact of COVID-19.*

### BAPTISM

Could biblical precedent, practice and policy provide possibilities in times of crisis?

We have denominational policies regarding who can baptise—commissioned and ordained pastors—and who a denominational leader can authorise to baptise—local church elders. But pastors

frequently invite those who have led their friends to Christ to join them in the water to assist in baptising. And, within insider missionary movements—for example, within Islam—a newly baptised clan leader might be asked to immediately baptise his wife, as well as other clan members.

Jesus' and Paul's new disciples baptised other new disciples (see John 3:22; 4:1–3; Acts 18:8; compare 1 Corinthians 1:14), and the context indicates something similar on Pentecost day (see Matthew 28:16–20; Acts 2:38–41).<sup>6</sup> On that day, most of the new believers would have been baptised in Jewish *miqva'ot*—the Jewish purification baths, either public or in private homes—which might suggest that they were immersed by going into the water and lowering themselves.

And the practice of accepting believers on the basis of *profession of faith*—immersed by people other than authorised ordained personnel—is also informative.<sup>7</sup>

In the current crisis, some people are more open to God and salvation. No pastor wishes to delay a person's testimony of faith in Christ with water and Spirit baptism—and, when prepared, their acceptance into the body of Christ.

*Suggestions only:*

If a person accepts Christ and is prepared for baptism—and you confirm their decision and commitment by phone or Zoom—you could (if regulations permit):

1. Meet at a river or the sea (just two of you, to meet public gathering rules)—and there bless from a distance (to meet social-distancing requirements), while the person immerses her- or himself beneath the water.
2. If some are baptised by believers who are not



## IF YOUR CHURCH IS CLOSED

commissioned or ordained (but isolated with them), at a later time they can be welcomed into church membership on the basis of *profession of faith*.

We give this careful consideration because of the eternal importance of a person receiving Christ and the assurance of their baptism by water and the Holy Spirit.

### THE LORD'S SUPPER

Sharing the Lord's Supper is an essential element of our practice and ecclesiology as believers. In the first centuries after Christ, it was a radical counter-cultural testimony by believers that Jesus Christ was their Lord and Saviour—not the Roman emperor, whose title Augustus meant *the majestic, venerable one*.

In New Testament times, this celebratory meal was shared every day by families in their homes (see Acts 2:42–47). However, since Constantine's time it has been the practice, as denominational policies prescribe, that only ordained pastors, elders and deacons officiate at the Lord's Supper.

As in the days of the early believers, believers today also need the assurance of salvation and cleansing in Jesus Christ—in times of trouble, crisis and distress—represented by the tangible experience of humility and the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper lifts up Jesus before believers, and by partaking of it in their homes, they “proclaim the Lord's death until he comes” (see 1 Corinthians 11:26).

In the current crisis and instability—with everyone's future insecure—our *household churches* must testify to salvation and the hope of Jesus' return. This can be done in no better way than for pastors to encourage all to share the Lord's Supper as an Agape meal.

*Suggestions only:*

A practice that has been widely welcomed by denominational leaders, pastors and members in many countries is: when the Lord's Supper is conducted in church buildings or branch churches, it is led by pastors, elders and deacons. However,

1. *Household churches* and families are encouraged to have the Lord's Supper as an Agape meal—led by those in the home.
2. For *Agape Meal Ideas*, see <[www.following-jesus.com/church-at-home/](http://www.following-jesus.com/church-at-home/)>.
  - Bread and grape juice. On the table, feature a platter of flat bread or unleavened biscuits and a jug of grape juice. Use normal-sized drinking glasses and larger pieces of bread. This is an experience, and participants need the opportunity to eat, drink and reflect.
  - Prayer. As you pause to eat, read of Jesus sharing the Passover meal with His disciples (see Matthew 26:17–30; Mark 14:12–26; compare 1 Corinthians 11:23–27). Reflect on what the bread and juice mean. Thank God for these symbols and for Jesus, then eat, drink and reflect.
  - Foot-washing could at times be a feature of Agape meals. It is tangible, real and meaningful. If members are sharing isolation with unchurched people, they could read what Jesus did (see John 13) and invite them to share in washing feet. It is amazing how powerful this experience is!

### ANOINTING

Healing prayer is so important in this season of suffering and distress. Read and reflect on the opportunities of anointing prayer (see James 5:13–15). This is not a last rite, but the privilege of every believer and one of the most meaningful responsibilities of a pastor.

*Suggestions only:*

While it is not possible, with current social-distancing and isolation rules, to be physically present:

1. Pray with people and invite another person in the home to place a small amount of oil on the forehead of the one for whom you are praying.
2. Equip and release your **Member care coordinator** to do the same and equip all involved in member care to follow the same practice.
3. Equip and release the spiritual leaders in your *household churches* to pray for each other, anointing them with oil.

Our people need our prayer support. In times of crisis, in various countries where I have served—in the midst of war and civil unrest—I have been called on to anoint many people each day. It is a time of mental and physical distress. Don't be surprised if your **Member care coordinator** and team are called on to anoint many. What a privilege. Remember: "The prayer of a righteous [person] is powerful and effective" (James 5:16).

# THE OPPORTUNITIES OF A BRIDGE TO THE OTHER SIDE

This guide is not intended to be comprehensive or prescriptive. However, it is my hope and prayer that it might encourage and bless us as pastors as we minister in these uncertain times.

There is much more that could be written—and you will need to discuss these things and be supported by your fellow pastors in Zoom conferences and other interactions. Conducting weddings, child dedications and funerals, and how many can assemble, are regulated by government authorities in harmony with social-distancing and isolation rules to contain the spread of COVID-19.

There is no way of telling how long we will be overseeing multiple *household churches*. Some are wondering what church might look like after this is over. Certainly, there is some consensus that many things will not be the same as before—for government, business, families, individuals or church. Multiple *households of faith* could become the new normal.

At the moment, however, we have the opportunity of serving our churches and communities during difficult times. And remember, you are not only the pastor of a local church—that has just multiplied. You are the pastor for all those living in your region,

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town, suburb or city—believers and unbelievers, those of no-faith and of multiple faiths in our communities. It is our privilege to meet their needs—and point them to Jesus.

But you are not asked to do it on your own. Follow Jesus' example and method—prepare, lay good foundations, cultivate participation, then multiply leaders and God's movement by equipping and releasing. How effective we are at *being church at home* now will determine what our churches look like when we get to the other side of this pandemic—but it is unlikely to be the same as before.

Pastor, your church building is closed—so your church must *be the church*.

# OTHER RESOURCES

For your convenience, resources referred to in this booklet have been collated at <[www.following-jesus.com](http://www.following-jesus.com)> but there are many other outstanding resources available for your network of household churches.

## **Hope Channel Church Online**

<[churchonline.hopechannel.com](http://churchonline.hopechannel.com)>

## **Australian Union Conference—for multiple resources**

Be the Church@Home resources and more

<[disciple.org.au](http://disciple.org.au)>

Youth and young adult

<[www.waymaker.tv](http://www.waymaker.tv)> and <[myedgemag.com](http://myedgemag.com)>

Families and children

<[www.facebook.com/SDAChildrenAndFamiliesAU/](http://www.facebook.com/SDAChildrenAndFamiliesAU/)>

Digital discipleship

<[digitaldisciples.info](http://digitaldisciples.info)>

Adventist e-giving—tithes and offerings

<[www.egiving.org.au/](http://www.egiving.org.au/)>

## IF YOUR CHURCH IS CLOSED

### **New Zealand Pacific Resource HUB—for multiple resources**

A comprehensive range of resources

[<disciple.org.nz/my-ministry>](http://disciple.org.nz/my-ministry)

Going digital

[<disciple.org.nz/goingdigital/>](http://disciple.org.nz/goingdigital/)

Adventist e-giving—tithes and offerings

[<egiving.org.nz>](http://egiving.org.nz)

### **South Pacific Division—for multiple resources**

Families and children

[<children.adventistchurch.com>](http://children.adventistchurch.com)

[<www.facebook.com/SPDChildrensMinistries/>](https://www.facebook.com/SPDChildrensMinistries/)

[<www.thetuis.tv>](http://www.thetuis.tv)

Pathfinder honours

[<pathfinders.adventistchurch.com/resources/category/honours/>](http://pathfinders.adventistchurch.com/resources/category/honours/)

Adventurer awards

[<adventurers.adventistconnect.org/adventurer-awards>](http://adventurers.adventistconnect.org/adventurer-awards)

### **MyFriends**

[<myfriends.network/content/AU/eng/>](http://myfriends.network/content/AU/eng/)

Training

[<www.powertochange.org.au/myfriends>](http://www.powertochange.org.au/myfriends)

# NOTES

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6. Roennfeldt, *op cit*, 2019, pages 87–8.
7. See Milton Adams, “Who Gave You Authority to Baptize?” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, Vol 14 [2019], No 1, Art. 10, pages 127–55—for a helpful case study of how Seventh-day Adventist Church policy allow for both the biblical concept of disciples baptising new disciples, as well as authority to baptise being limited to a clergy class.





PETER ROENNFELDT

IF  
YOU  
CAN **EAT...**  
YOU CAN MAKE  
DISCIPLES

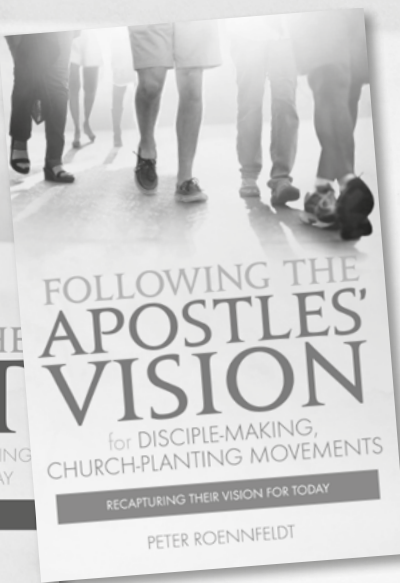
SHARING FAITH IN A MULTI-FAITH WORLD

"God's heart for all people is on every page.  
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—Kayle de Waal, head of Avondale Seminary, author, *Mission Shift*



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## **Pastor, your church has just multiplied.**

This guide is for pastors whose church buildings are closed to slow the COVID-19 pandemic. It's necessary. It's not optional.

## **Your church is now scattered to multiple households.**

*But Jesus said: "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20).*

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**Peter Roennfeldt** has served as a pastor, seminary teacher, evangelist and pastor to pastors, and provides resources and support for disciple-making and movement-building.



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