

Community during Corona: How Small Churches are Built to Shine during the Shelter in Place

Too small to stream live services during this pandemic? Your church can be exactly what your community needs right now.



The defeat in his voice was palpable on the phone. As a key leader at one of the churches I work with, he was desperate to figure out how his church of fifty people could survive these days. Tough times are here for all of us. The daily realities of Isolation, loneliness and haunting uncertainty affect us all. He felt it too. His small church didn't have the resources to live-stream worship services, and even if they did, a good number of his congregants were elderly and "technology- challenged". He wondered how his congregation could continue to minister while sheltering in place.

As we talked through his situation hope surfaced as he began to see this season as an opportunity to lean into the unique strengths of his smaller congregation. Here was the chance to pull together and "be the church" when the community needed it most! His church embraced the opportunity.

And, wow, it worked!

Over the last few weeks, this family-sized congregation developed an urgent sense of mission. They're caring for each other and reaching friends and family who are far from Christ. Technology-challenged elderly congregants feel like they're a valued part of the church family. Church leaders are using their gifts in ways not seen in years. In the middle of a pandemic the Holy Spirit is breathing Great Commandment and Great Commission life into this faith community.

Every church is figuring out how to “do church” during this pandemic. Large and mega-churches have done an amazing job of streaming worship services while meeting the needs of congregants and community. Even smaller churches regularly use simple platforms such as Facebook Live and YouTube to stream services. But for many smaller congregations even these simple solutions are undoable.

But the strengths of the small church, which include established relational networks, a bias toward congregational care, and shortened lines of communication are built for times like this. These churches just need to lean into those strengths.

As a leader in your smaller church, how do you help your church family thrive in the middle of this shelter-in-place coronavirus? Let me give you five practical actions:

1. Embrace a Vision for This Ministry Opportunity: *Help your key leaders catch the vision that this is an amazing opportunity for their small church.*

For the small church, these days are remarkably similar to what we see in the New Testament. The church met primarily in homes (Romans 16:3, 5), care/shepherding was shared among the leaders (1 Peter 5:1-3), worship gatherings were participatory (1 Corinthians 14:26). In reading Acts and the epistles, we catch a glimpse of churches where people knew each other well, treated each other like family (most of the time!) and met each other’s needs. Biblical and extra-biblical sources remark on the early church’s care and self-sacrifice for others - exactly the heart of Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer in John 17.

The uncomfortable truth is that churches (large and small) easily slip into simply keeping the doors open and maintaining good programs. This shelter-in-place restriction is a God-given opportunity to step back, and lean into, what it means to be the church – reaching/serving people and making disciples. Encourage your church leaders to see this as a God-given opportunity for your church.

2. Turn Church Leaders Into Shepherds: *Ask those who already have some leadership responsibilities in the church to care for specific congregants.*

Your church has some sort of ministry committee or governing board. In normal times committee/board members simply make decisions about how the church will operate. But, these are not normal times! Ask those who sit on boards/committees to each commit to care for three or four families in the church. This “shepherding” includes:

- Connecting weekly with their congregants to see how they are doing and if they need anything
- Praying for and with them
- Providing spiritual and other resources (if available) through the church
- Keeping them informed regarding what is happening at the church

Some of your church leaders will “shepherd” naturally. For others it will be a stretch - but a good one. Place all congregants on a master list and ask the shepherds to select “their” flock of three or four families. Shepherding works best when based on already established relationships. Be sure that all church attenders (even “Christmas and Easter” attenders) are covered. Shepherds and congregants should also be encouraged to contact friends outside the church family to express care as well. As people respond to expressions of concern, add them to the care of a shepherd.

Meet weekly via technology with your group of shepherds to make sure that communication/planning is clear, responsibility are carried out, and congregational care is happening as planned. Typically, those in leadership are technologically comfortable enough to operate this way. This group becomes your de facto leadership team during this season.

3. Establish New Communication Pathways: *Shift communication methods away from Sunday morning gatherings to methods that work for families sheltering at home.*

For the small church one of the biggest challenges is adjusting communication methods while not meeting on Sunday morning. In many family-sized churches announcements are simply made from the pulpit, listed in the Sunday bulletin, or given by congregants during a designated time in worship gatherings. These days communication needs to shift to what works for congregants while sheltering in place.

The simplest solution is to regularly update the church website or social media page and send an email or text asking people to go there for the latest updates. Shepherds should direct their people there regularly. In cases where elderly members are unable to access technology, the shepherds need to communicate with them with a good ol' fashioned weekly phone call. And, these folks love that weekly call!

Shepherds also need to keep their people up to speed on other shelter-in-place adjustments. Some small churches encourage ongoing contributions through sending out self-addressed stamped envelopes along with a letter sharing the vision for how God is using their church during this time. Other churches ask congregants to participate in common daily on-line devotional (such as available through YouVersion). Shepherds may need to make hard copies for those unable to participate on-line.

The bottom line is that these shepherds ensure each person under their care is cared for and connected to the church family.

4. Connect Together On Sunday: *Use Zoom or another community platform to connect on Sunday morning in place of your usual worship gathering.*

Invite those who are able to use technology to connect at a published time on Sunday for a time of connection, Bible lesson, prayer and worship. This is different than the streaming used by larger congregations. Using a community-sharing platform such as Zoom allows the church gathering to still feel like members are participating in a church worship service. This participatory experience is vital for those who are accustomed to the small church experience. Invite people via email, text or the website and encourage your people to invite friends who do not attend already. At the gathering, people see and connect with their friends. Guests get an opportunity to observe/connect with a faith gathering. Elderly folks who do not have technology can listen in via phone.

Participation is key. Assign various components of the gathering to different church leaders/members. The pastor may do a Bible lesson for 20 minutes, a worship leader may play a song or two (either on video or live), someone reads scripture and still another person leads the group in prayer. Prayer requests can be shared in the meeting or texted to one church member's phone. Personal stories pack a punch. Encourage a church member to tell the others what God is doing in their life during this season. By the way, this participatory approach sounds very much like 1 Corinthians 14:26!

Assigned roles for the Sunday gathering ahead of time and keep the gathering to about 45 minutes – the typical drop-off time for on-line meetings. Email invitations need to be extended to all congregants by Friday so recipients have time to invite friends and family who may be looking for hope and support during this unique time.

For people that do not have the required technology to participate in an online gathering, shepherds need to bring them up to speed after the gathering. They give them the basics of the lesson and information they might need to know.

Participation and ownership of the gathering by church leaders and members is critical to making this approach work. People can stream amazing church worship services anywhere, but this is their best opportunity for spiritual community while they are sheltering in place.

- 5. Pray, Review and Repeat:** *Spend time each week with the shepherding/leadership team praying together, reviewing progress, and working together to carry out the mission.*

You have to pay special attention to how things are going, communication and planning during this time. Prayer allows the whole team to bring the vision of “getting back to basics” before God on a regular basis.

I love seeing how that discouraged church leader who called me leaned into the strengths of his small church. And, as I said above, it is working.

Last week I learned that one of his shepherds had reached out to a friend from high school to express care and see how she was doing. This high school friend was a single mother of teenagers who had just heard that her landlord was not renewing her lease – in the middle of this coronavirus. Through tears she told him on the phone that she wasn’t sure how to cope. That church leader encouraged her, prayed with her and encouraged her to join the Sunday gathering. She did and is now connected the church family that is caring for her and helping her in her spiritual journey.

This is a unique time in history and as smaller churches lean into their unique strengths this can be a shining moment for the church of Jesus Christ in communities all around the world. We just have to seize the opportunity.

Chris Calvert is a church ministry consultant with Church Assistance Ministry, a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary, and lives in Fresno, California with his wife, Michele.