



the Post- Quarantine Church

SIX URGENT CHALLENGES + OPPORTUNITIES

That Will Determine the Future of Your Congregation

Thom S. Rainer



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The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges and Opportunities That Will Determine the Future of Your Congregation

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*To the church leaders in
the Church Answers community.
I am honored to serve you.*

*And always to Nellie Jo.
I am honored you said yes.*

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INTRODUCTION

AFTER THE QUARANTINE

Do you remember where you were?

It's a common question when talking about historic events. We like to recall exactly where we were and what we were doing when we heard about a great event or a tragic moment. In addition to remembering historic achievements such as landing a man on the moon, tearing down the Berlin Wall, and the Chicago Cubs winning a World Series, I've been around long enough to recall four distinct tragedies, each separated by about twenty years.

Though I was only in third grade at the time, I'll never forget November 22, 1963.

"Boys and girls," my teacher said with a surprising degree of emotion, "I want you all to focus on the words I'm about to say. I want you to remember this moment clearly the rest of your lives. President Kennedy has been shot and killed. He has been assassinated. The president is dead."

That was a hard dose of reality for a classroom of eight-year-olds, but ever since that day, I have been fascinated with the Kennedy assassination. I have my own theories about

what happened, and some of my most prized collectibles and artifacts are connected to that sad day.

Fast-forward more than two decades. I was a full-time seminary student, working thirty hours a week at a bank to support my family. I can remember standing in the bank lobby on January 28, 1986, watching on television as the space shuttle *Challenger* lifted off from Cape Canaveral. I remember my confusion when, barely a minute into the flight, the rocket became a ball of fire with plumes of smoke shooting every which way.

It took me about thirty minutes to fully realize the *Challenger* was gone. Seven lives were lost, including that of Christa McAuliffe, the first schoolteacher to go into space.

Fifteen years after the *Challenger* explosion came the tragic event known simply as September 11. I was a seminary dean, and I went to chapel that morning in 2001 with the knowledge that two planes had flown into the twin towers of New York City's World Trade Center. But I didn't know why. By the time chapel was over, the towers had collapsed.

Another two decades later, we were struck by the global coronavirus pandemic, and nation by nation the world went into lockdown mode. Within two months, the unwieldy name for the virus—"2019-nCoV" or "2019 novel coronavirus"—had become "COVID-19" or simply "the virus."

Four tragic moments in history. Four events I will never forget. Four disasters that resulted in death.

But here's the thing about the fourth tragedy. I don't remember where I was when I first heard about COVID-19.

The three previous catastrophes were tied to specific dates and times, but I heard about the virus in bits and pieces. There was no singular event like an assassination, a spaceship explosion, or planes crashing into towers. Our awareness grew only as the virus spread.

The COVID-19 pandemic likely spread to the United States in January 2020. We began to hear about people dying in China and Italy and elsewhere, but few of us were paying attention to the imminent threat to our own nation. The first known COVID-19 deaths in the United States occurred the following month.

I'm not exactly sure when my wife and I began our COVID-19 quarantine. I remember recording podcasts with two guys in my office sometime in March. And I remember one of them saying he was headed home to Kansas City, where he might have to stay for a while because his company was suspending all travel. My self-quarantine would have started shortly after those podcasts, but I don't remember the date with precision.

Here are some other differences I observed: The first three events caused people to flood into churches. The fourth event, the virus, closed the churches' doors for a season. And we knew when the first three events were over, but we're still not entirely certain about the fourth.

I have only the vaguest memory of the Trump administration declaring a public health emergency on January 31, 2020. But I remember the quarantine. I clearly remember the quarantine.

The Quarantined Church

Historians will record the 2020 pandemic from a number of perspectives. They will look at the tragedy of widespread death and other health issues. They will point to the state of urgency in hospitals and nursing homes. They will recall the ongoing updates on television and other media, and the daily scorecard that read like a war report: cases confirmed, deaths recorded, and recoveries made.

Stories will certainly be told from an economic standpoint. Companies and stores closing. Some closing permanently. Main streets, malls, and movie theaters emptied. Unemployment soaring. Government assistance and funds flooding forth, encouraging some and frustrating others. Stock markets tanking, then recovering, then becoming unpredictable again.

It will take years before the full emotional and mental toll can be assessed. But it will indeed be a topic of interest for historians, psychologists, counselors, and the news media. We don't know the full story. But we will likely be surprised by how devastating COVID-19 was to the global psyche.

Through my blog, webinars, and church consultations, I walked with tens of thousands of church leaders through the pandemic. I coached many leaders directly and spoke or wrote to nearly a million others. I observed the uncertainty and angst that began when the first in-person worship service was canceled. I witnessed the fallout that followed.

In the early days of the quarantine, I worked with church

leaders primarily on issues of finance and giving. The financial support for many of these churches came primarily through the offering plate. Consequently, with no in-person worship services, there was no offering. With no offering, there were no incoming funds to support the ministries of the church.

As you can imagine, there was an abundance of concern.

I almost wrote, “there was panic,” but that would have been misleading and unfair. With few exceptions, there was more faith than fear. More perseverance than panic. These church leaders trusted God wherever he would lead them. But the church leaders were also feeling challenged because they really didn’t know where God was leading them.

I guess that’s the nature of faith.

As our Church Answers team started working with church leaders on the emerging new realities presented by the lockdown, we focused initially on helping them move as many members as possible to digital giving. We encouraged tech-savvy and highly relational members to work one-on-one with senior adults who had serious apprehensions about the digital world. Then we guided pastors and other church leaders to review their current budgets and planned expenses. What could they postpone? What could they cut? What could they do differently? What could they do better?

Within a few days, we began working with churches to help them move their worship services to a digital format. I was amazed by how energetic and creative most of these

members and church leaders were. Though some of the early attempts at streaming their services hit rough spots, they improved with each passing week. The leaders and members knew something was changing, and it was not all bad. More on that later.

I expected to get a lot of questions on pastoral care and reaching the community during the quarantine. Again the church leaders and members surprised me with their drive and innovation. They found ways to minister despite the restrictions imposed by the quarantine. Indeed, many discovered they had a greater outward focus and opportunities for pastoral care than they'd had in previous years. The pandemic, at least as it pertained to serving the surrounding community, was a positive wake-up call.

It felt like forever, but it didn't take long before church leaders were thinking about returning to in-person services. The question wasn't so much *when* they should open. That date varied from community to community and state to state. Rather, they were asking *how* they should open. How do we maintain social distancing in a worship service? Should we add services? Is congregational singing a conduit for the virus? How do we gradually return to in-person gatherings when some people are rarin' to go and others are more reluctant? What do we do with the children? Should we shorten the services?

The questions ranged from numerous to voluminous. At Church Answers, we found ourselves spending more time helping churches get back to in-person services

post-quarantine than we had with issues that came up during the quarantine. It was a time of both excitement and concern. Church members and leaders were eager to get back together, but they didn't want to do anything that could be harmful to the well-being of their congregants.

As our team began to walk with churches through the post-quarantine era, I remember my first conversation with a pastor who told me he couldn't wait for things to get back to normal. I responded softly that I didn't think we would *ever* return to the pre-quarantine normal.

I saw the look in his eyes. It was as if I had stolen his joy. His demeanor changed immediately. He could hardly maintain eye contact.

"What do you mean?" he asked sadly.

As much as I hated punching a hole in that pastor's enthusiasm, I didn't want him walking blindly into a world that no longer exists.

As jarring as it may have been for him, I wanted to help him and his church prepare themselves for the post-quarantine era.

"Not So Fast, My Friend!"

I'm a college football fan, and I love watching *College GameDay's* coverage on ESPN. One of my favorite lines comes from the irrepressible Lee Corso whenever he disagrees with a colleague: "Not so fast, my friend!"

Thus far, I have resisted the temptation to use that line

with church leaders who expect the new normal of the post-quarantine church to look much like the old normal of the pre-pandemic church. Not only will there be significant differences, but it will also likely take some time before we even begin to understand what the new era will look like.

So, not so fast, my friend!

Allow me instead to share with you what my team and I have learned over the past weeks and months. We have worked with many churches as they've made their reentry to in-person services. There have been some challenges, to be sure, but there have been many more opportunities. We've had the advantage of hearing from thousands of church leaders and members every week. We don't claim to have all the answers, but we have gleaned a lot of good information by asking a lot of questions.

If I could offer some simple advice as we begin, it would be this: *Be excited and encouraged*. Don't let the unknown become a source of fear. You are not entering this new era alone. Not only is God *with* you; he has gone *before* you.

Indeed, as we travel through this book together, I hope you will find cause for optimism and encouragement. My hopeful attitude is based on two realities. First and foremost, none of this—the pandemic, the quarantine, the post-quarantine period—caught God by surprise. He has a plan ready and waiting for his church.

Second, we are already seeing churches adapt and adjust to this season of change in ways unlike any I have seen in my lifetime. I've heard similar themes from pastors, church

staff, other church leaders, and church members. They are not entering the post-quarantine era with a business-as-usual mentality. The pandemic was a wake-up call like none other. The post-quarantine era is an opportunity to make the necessary positive changes to move our churches forward.

Get ready to begin the journey. From my perspective, the church is entering the most amazing and exciting days it has seen in decades—maybe even in centuries. Though the path will not always be easy, we can expect future days of great opportunity.

It is time for us to enter this new land of possibilities with hope, promise, and enthusiasm.

Let's begin by discovering new opportunities for the in-person gathered church.

CHALLENGE 1

GATHER DIFFERENTLY AND BETTER



Do you remember that simple game we played with our hands as children in Sunday school?

“Here is the church. Here is the steeple. Open the doors and see all the people.”

As you opened your hands, if you had intertwined your fingers facing inward, they represented all the people inside the church. It’s a fun exercise to show your children or grandchildren.

But the little example became less popular over the years. With theological and biblical precision, people pointed out that the church building is not the church. In fact, some people insisted we stop using the phrase “go to church.” They were adamant that people *are* the church; they don’t

go to the church. Like glass-half-empty folks, they seemed to prefer the other version of the “here is the church, here is the steeple” game—the one where you intertwine your fingers on the *outside* of your hands and when you open them up, “Where are all the people?”

Sigh.

Okay, I get it. The church is not a building, and the building is not a church. But the church facility is the place where the church gathers. The church facility may be a traditional church building. It may be a house. It may be a grove of trees. Still, it is a place where the church gathers.

The writer of Hebrews wants church members to encourage and motivate one another. In his letter, he is explicit in this desire and hope: “Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works.”¹ So how do we do that? Look at the next verse: “Let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.”²

Did you get that? As fellow believers, we encourage one another when we meet together. The gathered church is important. Indeed, during the pandemic, we missed the in-person, gathered church greatly.

The quarantine, however, also gave us an opportunity to reflect. As church leaders planned for reentry to the gathered church, they began asking important questions: Are we using our church facilities with optimum stewardship? What can we do differently? What can we do better?

Many church leaders are seeing the post-quarantine era as

a great time to ask these questions. And many are deciding to do things differently.

Simple Church Revisited

When Eric Geiger and I wrote *Simple Church* many years ago, we developed the thesis that churches need a clear plan of discipleship. Based on Eric's research, we discovered that many churches had already developed such a plan, and they communicated their discipleship process through a vision statement.

But we were not fully prepared for the responses we received to *Simple Church*, particularly in one area. One key to being a simple church, we said, was to focus on those areas that were primary to the church's mission and, if possible, eliminate everything else.

Those two words, *focus* and *eliminate*, became rallying cries for many church leaders. Some moved forward with wisdom, eliminating nonessential busywork without creating too much controversy. Some leaders were not so wise. Like the proverbial bull in the china shop, they created more division than efficiency.

Still, the essence of the issue was basic. Our churches had busied themselves trying to do too many things that were not essential to the core mission of the congregation.

Church facilities became the focus of the busy church. We often gauged the health of a congregation by the number of times people came to the facility for worship services,

groups, ministries, programs, and events. A busy building, we surmised, was a sign of vibrancy and health.

The unintended consequences of a full church calendar were many. For example, some church members were so busy “going to church” that they failed to be on mission in their community. The most active members were often the least evangelistic members because they spent so much time inside the building instead of out in the community.

Families often suffered as well. Parents had fewer hours for family time because of the steady stream of activities at church. Though the local church was certainly not the only culprit contributing to the overcommitted family, it was a factor for many.

Churches also had challenges with recruiting volunteers. Too many people were too busy. They had no spare time to offer.

Now we have a new opportunity before us. We have seen that the church can survive, even thrive, without the everyday use of buildings. And though we certainly advocate the importance of gathering in person, we also see the opportunity in the post-quarantine era to use our facilities for greater and more efficient purposes.

This brief chapter is by no means an exhaustive compendium of ways to gather better and more efficiently in our facilities. I hope, however, this discussion will stir your creative juices.

When the Community Gathers at Our Facilities

My team and I were doing a consultation for a church that had been experiencing a subtle but noticeable decline for nearly a decade. They wanted outside eyes to look at their congregation. They were in a community with decent demographic growth. They had very nice facilities. They were financially sound. And there had been no major conflicts or controversies in the church.

What could possibly be wrong?

As we do in many of our consultations, we asked for all the documents on the church, both digital and paper. One from this church was particularly fascinating. It was titled “Policies and Procedures for the Use of Church Facilities.” It was sixty-four pages long. Seriously.

As our team read this sizable rule book, one thing was very clear: It was a treatise on how to keep the surrounding community *away* from the church.

I understand that churches must have some facility guidelines for coordination and liability purposes. But this manual was ridiculous. It was symptomatic of the inward focus of the congregation. There were too many rules and regulations governing nonmembers. Any guest who was given the document would have received a clear message: *You are not welcome here.*

What if we turned this thinking on its head? What if we

viewed our church facilities as a tool to reach our community? What if we thought of ways to bring the community in instead of keeping them out?

That's a novel concept for many post-quarantine churches.

It's time to reset our perspective in this new era. It's time to reset how we use our facilities. For too many years, church facilities have been primarily for the benefit of *members*. Occasionally, a church would tout the building of a new facility as a way to reach the community. Most of the time, it was an empty promise. As soon as the facility was built, it became simply a new place for church members.

What if we were to look at our church facilities from the perspective of the community? John Mark Clifton tells of his experiences when he began serving as pastor of Wornall Road Baptist Church in Kansas City. The church was on the brink of closing. It had become irrelevant to the community.

The few members left in the congregation saw little hope for their church. Their large facility's deferred maintenance alone seemed an insurmountable barrier to the faithful few. So when the new pastor suggested they get the church ready for the community, it seemed like a major dose of a naïveté or a cruel joke. They were thousands of dollars away from getting their church facilities usable. They could hardly pay their utility bills. How could they possibly revamp their church building for the community?

But the pastor led the endeavor with a few cans of paint and the help of volunteer labor. One room was painted in bright and varied colors. They dubbed it "the birthday

room.” Then the members put flyers on their neighbors’ doors. The message was simple but compelling. The church would provide a place for neighborhood children to celebrate birthdays. The cost would be zero. Church members would assist at the parties. The only thing the neighbor had to do was make a reservation and show up with the kids.

It was transformative—not only for the families in the neighborhood; it was transformative for the church.

Typically, churches will welcome the community for well-planned, seasonal events. The Christmas musical. The Easter presentation. The children’s concert. And there’s nothing wrong with these events. But what if we tried something different? What if we *asked the community* how our church facilities could best serve them? What if we turned the purpose of our church buildings upside down? What if the facilities became a place *for* the community as well as a place *in* the community?

During the quarantine, many church leaders and church members discovered that the church was still the church, even without its facilities. Yes, we desired to return to in-person gatherings so we could be with our friends again. But we found we could do a lot of things as a church without relying on our buildings. Indeed, the digital world opened up possibilities that many congregations had never considered, much less tried.

We realized, it seemed, that our facilities were more tools than necessities. What if we now use those tools to reach and minister to our community?

I recently took a tour of a church facility in Georgia that had been remodeled to better minister to the community. Nearly half of the large buildings were now dedicated specifically to community needs. One section was a large break area for law enforcement. Another area was used as a medical clinic. By the time they were done, the building included numerous washers and dryers that community residents could use at no cost. During certain hours, childcare was provided at the church laundromat.

Another church in a different economic demographic began making plans to establish partnerships with local businesses. They already had a place for community members to work with free Wi-Fi. But they wanted to do more. When they heard about other churches that have sandwich shops and restaurants on-site owned by for-profit businesses, and one that opened its facilities to a private preschool instead of recreating the wheel by starting their own preschool ministry, they were inspired to take a blank slate approach and think creatively about their options. I'm certain this church will soon become a magnet *in* and *for* their community.

The leaders of a rural church, located in a sparsely populated area with nothing resembling a community center for thirty miles, are now dreaming about using their worship center and fellowship hall for community needs. They realize that the small school in the area doesn't have an adequate space to hold events. But the church's worship center can hold nearly two hundred people. It is ideal for community *and* school events.

Do you get the picture? Having become accustomed to doing without our buildings for many weeks, we're now able to look at our church facilities with different eyes. We can see them more as a tool for outreach rather than a cocoon for members.

Churches across America and around the world own billions of dollars' worth of real estate and facilities. God has provided these assets for us to be good stewards. Most church facilities go unused for large blocks of time every week. It's time to rethink our facilities. It's time to open them up to our communities.

A New Mindset: Looking for Signs

I have led or participated in hundreds of church consultations. One of the first things our consulting team does on-site is take a tour of the church facilities. We look at the parking area. We do a quick assessment of the worship-center capacity. We focus on the children's area for safety and hygiene. We ask about the flow of both automobile traffic and foot traffic.

Among our many checkpoints is an inventory of the signs in and around the church buildings. Is there good directional signage entering the parking lot? Can visitors easily locate the main entrance to the church building? Are restrooms clearly marked? Are young parents able to see on their first visit where to take their children?

Over the years, we have mentally noted and sometimes written about "*unwelcome signs.*" These are the signs that

tell members and guests (usually guests) what they *can't* do. Don't bring coffee into the sanctuary. Don't enter the worship service after 11:15 a.m. Don't loiter in the parking lot. No skateboards.

You get the idea.

While some of these signs are there for safety and liability purposes, most have been posted to keep outsiders from messing up the church property. The signs are an outward, physical expression of an inwardly focused church. The church facility is an exclusive haven for church members. Don't disturb the religious club or any of its artifacts.

The post-quarantine church has a new opportunity because God has given us a way to see our church facilities in a new light. We learned that it isn't absolutely necessary to have millions of dollars in facilities in order to have a church. But maybe, just maybe, since so many of us already have these facilities in place, God intends for us to use them for the good of our communities.

We may have to do some extra cleaning and paint the walls more often. But that's a small price to pay to reach people all around us with the lifesaving gospel of Jesus.

Open the Doors More Often

My conversation with a pastor from Virginia was insightful. His church had never livestreamed their services before the pandemic. Like other leaders, he jumped into the digital world out of necessity.

“We couldn’t meet in person, so we had to meet virtually,” he told me. “But our church is not that big; we had never tried Facebook Live or anything like it. We had to learn quickly. It was rough at first, but we caught on pretty well.”

While other pastors and church leaders were excited about the number of Facebook views they were getting early in the quarantine, this Virginia pastor was not enamored. “Intuitively, I just didn’t put much stock in the number of people who may have watched us for three seconds or thirty seconds. It was almost like a passing fad.”

What fascinated me about our conversation, however, was his totally different perspective of the streaming process, at least compared to most of his peers.

“While my pastor buddies were getting excited about views, I noticed something else taking place,” he said. “My church members began sharing with me the different days or times when they watched the services. I heard the same thing from a number of people in the community.”

By the intensity on his face, I could see his mind working. “It was a big lesson for me,” he continued with even more enthusiasm. “People were ‘attending’ our services at different times and different days. Before COVID-19, we were thinking we would have to add a second Sunday morning service. Not anymore. We have this nice-size facility that hardly ever gets used except about two days a week. If people are watching us digitally at different times, maybe they would like to have different options for days to attend an in-person service.”

The pastor began testing Thursday nights as a possibility. So far, he is encouraged by the response. He heard our Church Answers team say that about one-third of the American workforce is at work on Sundays, and he really wants to reach that group in his community.

It only took a pandemic and some rethinking about the use of his church facilities to move him in that direction.

Two (or More) Churches, One Location

The past two decades have witnessed the rapid growth of multisite churches. In the early days of this movement, these churches often described themselves as “one church, two locations.” This phenomenon shows no signs of slowing. The multisite movement was once solely the domain of larger churches. Today, churches of all sizes may have more than one location.

A church planter who is part of our Church Answers community shared a story about a providential digital meeting with another member of the community. Members often have conversations at our forum called Church Answers Central.

“We were commenting about the timing of reopening,” he began. “I shared that our situation was particularly challenging because we had been meeting at a local middle school, and the school would not open for our church anytime soon.”

Somehow, one of the pastors in the forum recognized that the church planter was in his same community. “It was

an incredible moment,” the young church planter told us. “He messaged me and we began a conversation. That led to several phone calls, and he eventually invited us to share his church facility. For now, we will meet on Sunday afternoon, at least until we can find a better option. And we really had *no* options until we connected.”

The quarantine was a challenge. The quarantine was also a blessing.

Pastors and other church leaders began to view their times of gathering with fresh eyes. Likewise, they began to view their facilities with a fresh perspective. The post-quarantine era may prove to be a time of extraordinary experimentation and innovation in the use of church facilities.

At the very least, we hope many churches will become much more intentional about using their church facilities as a means to connect with their communities. We agree that the building is not the church, but it can be a valuable tool.

We hope many churches will welcome schools, businesses, and local governments to use their facilities. In some smaller communities, the church facility may be the closest thing they have to a community center.

We hope many churches will use their facilities for gathered worship services at new and innovative times; that they will not be stuck in old paradigms that make no sense from a stewardship perspective.

We hope some different churches will meet in the same facilities. There is usually plenty of room and plenty of available days for other congregations.

Because churches could not gather for a season, they are now learning how to gather both differently and better. As a happy consequence, both the churches and their communities will be healthier and served more vibrantly.

Three Thoughts

1. Think of one innovative way your church could use its facilities, perhaps something that has never been done.
2. Think of alternative days and times when your church could gather for worship services. Think creatively to reach people you are not currently reaching.
3. Think of ways your church could possibly partner with the local government or schools to use your facilities.