

## Reflections on LRBC & “The New Normal”

Our present “stay-at-home” pattern of life will ultimately last for at least 2-3 months (beginning in mid-March). During that time, new habits and rhythms of life will form, some healthy and some unhealthy. These new habits will have ample time to solidify and will not easily change when the lockdown ends. When the broad lockdown ends, we’re unlikely to receive a general “all clear” but will probably instead see restrictions eased (not removed) in phases. There may also be alternating times of easing and tightening of restrictions as the virus ebbs and flows over the next 12-18 months until a vaccine is widely available.

The point is, we won’t “go back to normal”. Instead, we will move into a “new normal”. If the church fails to plan for and lean into ministering to that new normal, we will become increasingly irrelevant and ultimately die. We must use the present time to determine what Welcoming In, Building Up, and Reaching Out should look like in the new normal.

We can shine brighter as a lighthouse for Christ at the corner of Clipper and Mariner, but we must change and do so rapidly. That means we will likely be making changes with less certainty than we would prefer. We must let prayer guide us and be willing to walk by faith rather than sight. The following are my current thoughts on what that “new normal” could look like with regard to the church.

**I begin with six changes I believe are quite likely:**

- 1. In-person gatherings will be both more precious and smaller.**
  - People will be simultaneously hungry for, and afraid of, in-person contact for months or years to come.
  - Many will crave in-person contact and there will be joyous reunions and vibrant in-person worship and fellowship as restrictions ease.
  - However, others will be tentative and afraid about large gatherings for a long time. Social distancing will remain part of the new normal.
  - Restrictions on gathering size (e.g. 50 person limits) are likely to remain in place or else be enacted and removed with a certain frequency.
  - We will likely need more, smaller services on Sunday mornings.
  - Saturday night dinner church is ideal for this new normal.
- 2. Digital church is, and will remain, real church. It cannot be an afterthought ever again.**
  - Some, especially families and those most vulnerable from a health perspective, will not come back in-person on Sunday morning, at least not quickly. They will delight in worshipping safely or as an entire family at home.
  - We must invest significant thought and prayer into what it means to Welcome In, Build Up, and Reach Out online - including to those who live physically distant from LRBC.

- Technical glitches, sound problems, etc. that were tolerable/annoying/embarrassing in person are utterly unacceptable in digital church - they must be resolved aggressively.
- We must invest significant funds which we didn't plan for right now to create high-quality online church experiences both during and after the present restrictions.
- Membership, member meetings, and routine committee/team meetings must include online participation or even be primarily online.
- Every group and course should operate in a hybrid (in-person + online) mode once restrictions are eased, so that people can participate in whichever way they need or desire.

### **3. Real community will be more vital than most previously realized.**

- There will be ongoing pain as a result of this pandemic - financial, emotional, and spiritual. People need to be in community to minister to one another.
- There will be increased social isolation in the "new normal" - there will be far more teleworking, far less eating out, and many fewer movie theaters and social venues. People will be looking for community and the church should be the best place to find it - in small gatherings.
- There will also be ongoing/recurring size limits on gatherings and the best way to consistently comply with those will be to meet in individual homes for fellowship, ministry, and possibly even online worship.
- We must aggressively encourage every member of our community of faith (both in-person and online) into a small group for the purpose of community, care, fellowship, and growth.
- Small groups should become the primary vehicle for community, serving, and sharing Christ (Five-to-Thrive).
- We will have a brief window of time for people, especially families, to establish new, healthier, more godly rhythms of life as restrictions ease and we must be prepared to engage everyone into a small group who isn't currently part of one.

### **4. Reaching Out must actually be out in the community.**

- The unchurched will be less interested than ever in coming to a large gathering in an unfamiliar building.
- We must be out and serving in the community visibly and consistently now and after restrictions ease.
- Being good neighbors - both individually and as the church - will probably be our best approach to reach people for the gospel.
- We must aggressively strategize about how to connect with people during a time when in-person contact will continue to be viewed with suspicion and fear.
- Reaching people in a contactless manner will cost money we didn't expect to spend. We must spend this money.
- Outdoor gatherings will be viewed as safer than indoor gatherings. Home gatherings will be viewed as safer than church gatherings.

### **5. Sunday morning 9:00am programs for children and youth are probably no longer viable.**

- These programs were already out of step with Northern Virginia family life - LRBC parents demonstrated that through inconsistent attendance and consistent tardiness.
- After 2-3 months of families enjoying quiet Sunday mornings with family worship at 10:30, most probably aren't coming back at 9:00.
- We must collaborate with parents to define the best way to partner with them in discipling their kids - which may look like investing our energy and resources in better equipping them to lead family worship and discipleship at home and/or identifying a different day or time to gather either in family groups or age-graded groups.

**6. The way we budget and spend money has to change now.**

- Some things that seemed important in December are clearly not important now.
- Other things we never imagined are suddenly quite important.
- We need to re-align our budget pretty substantially by June 30.
- There will likely be a long-term drop-off financially because of lasting economic harm in our community. We will need to adapt to this.

**I conclude with two open questions to which I do not know the answer. However, they are so significant we must consider them:**

**7. Is gathered/attractational programming for kids and youth a thing of the past?**

- If families are afraid or restricted from gathering we may not be able to viably or consistently conduct these programs, at least not as we have in the past. This includes Wednesday nights, Sunday mornings, VBS, camps, and events.
- These developed around a school model in the 1800s and were vital during a time of limited educational opportunity for poor families.
- These may no longer be relevant, effective, or possible.
- Would it be better to invest heavily in training, recruiting, and resourcing to encourage and equip parents to disciple their kids and youth, because that approach is both biblical and virus-proof?
- The viability of MDO during the next 12-18 months of viral turbulence is somewhat uncertain and will require contingency planning.

**8. What is the actual value and virtue of our building relative to its ongoing operating costs?**

- The ebb and flow of group-size restrictions could dramatically impact the usability of our physical building.
- At least some of the time, the Worship Center and Fellowship Hall will remain useful, as will some group meeting rooms.
- Nonetheless, small groups, mostly meeting in homes are far more restriction-proof than larger gatherings in the building, driving down the overall demand for rooms.
- We may need to consider ways to monetize part of the building to support the operations of a facility that is too large for the new normal. For example, we may need to seriously consider converting and renting out much of the basement to

commercial or non-profit enterprises, both as an income stream and to put that portion of the building to meaningful use.