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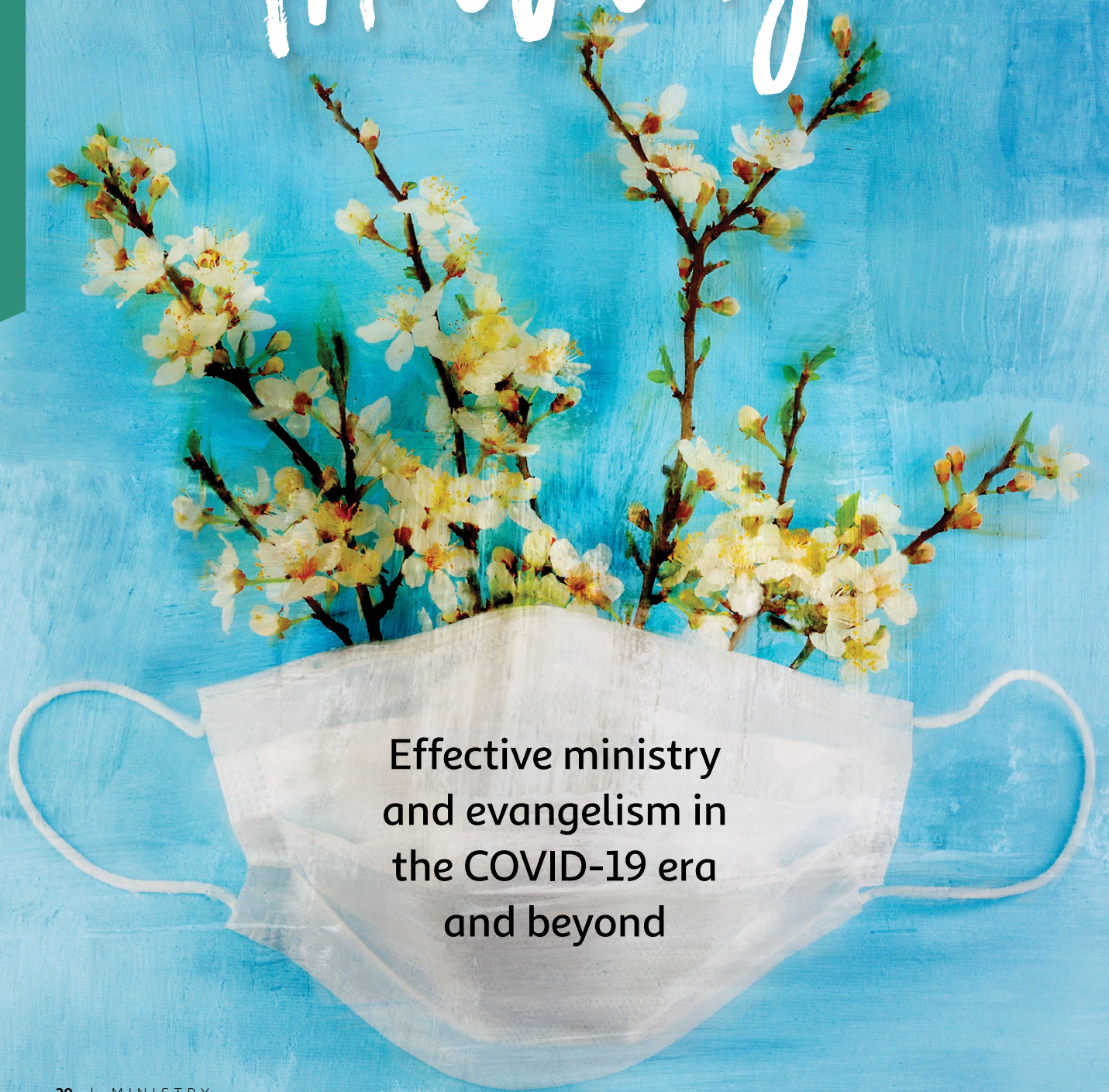
From Surviving to Thriving: Effective Ministry and Evangelism in the COVID-19 Era and Beyond

S. Joseph Kidder

Willie Edward Hucks II

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S. Joseph Kidder, DMin, is a professor of pastoral theology and discipleship, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States.

Willie Edward Hucks II, DMin, is an associate professor of pastoral theology and homiletics and chair of the Department of Christian Ministry, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States.



SCAN FOR AUDIO

New Year's Day 2020 dawned with the hope of a brand-new year. Many churches held a clear vision for what would transpire for the next 12 months. Then COVID-19 struck.

While some have bemoaned this as an unwelcome disruption of church life, others have grasped this as an unprecedented opportunity for ministry. Pastors and other dedicated Christians have navigated these uncharted waters to successfully conduct ministry and mission in a COVID-19 world. How has this been accomplished? We discovered seven ways.

1. Expand the ministry base

Many churches expanded ministry to their members. Healthy and young parishioners volunteered to buy food for elderly people and those with preexisting health conditions. Some churches contacted every member by phone, through Zoom, or in person with social distancing while wearing a mask.

Many churches also intensified their ministry to the community. Fio and Sofia Oudri, two young girls from Berrien Springs, Michigan, made beautiful cards and went to every house in their community, handing them to the people or placing them on doors. They told the people that they love them and are praying for them, and that if they need anything—such as buying groceries or a ride to the doctor—their parents would be happy to help.

A church in Auburn, Washington, offered COVID-19 testing free of charge to the community. The mayor of the city was so impressed by this gesture, she went to the church twice to thank them for their love and kindness. Other churches offered food, clothes, diapers, and other necessary items to community residents in need.

2. Reach out and touch someone

Churches discovered that it is essential to connect with members and friends in any way possible. Pastor Rayssan Guimaraes Cruz, from Nanuque in Brazil, visited every member in his church, active and inactive, giving them flowers and praying with them. One inactive member was so impressed by the care the pastor showed, he gave enough money to send the missionary book of the year to every home in the city. Rayssan's church experienced life-changing revival, heightened spiritual life, increased giving, and greater attendance via live streaming before eventually coming back to in-person church services.

Pastor David Morgan from Hayden Lake, Idaho, saw his attendance increase from 170 to 350 per week after the lockdown was lifted. He stated, "It is the desire for fellowship after several months of being locked down and the personal touch of the members that is driving people to come."

3. Release the potential of the laity

For churches to be effective today, they need to apply Paul's admonition that everyone in the body of Christ contribute to the well-being of others in the church or the community, just as the various parts of the human body contribute to other parts of the body (1 Cor. 12:27–30).

Even if you are not creative, you can still be curious and become part of the synergy of everyone working together. Ellen G. White reminds us, "The perfection of the church depends not on each member being fashioned exactly alike. God calls for each one to take his proper place, to stand in his lot, to do his appointed work according to the ability which has been given him."¹ Let us rely on each other, especially when faced with unprecedented challenges.

4. Serve the community

Far from COVID-19 slowing our outreach, does it provide a clarion call for us to redefine our outreach? The Highland Avenue Seventh-day Adventist Church in Benton Harbor, Michigan, conducts an annual back-to-school event every August. Children in the adjacent community come to the church grounds for food, fun, and backpacks filled with school supplies to get them started for the upcoming year.

In 2020, with physical distancing orders in place, the members left the church and took their back-to-school ministry to the community. In conjunction with the community property manager, collaboration became the key that opened the door to community engagement. Pastor Eric Bell even engaged with governmental agencies to secure the church's facilities to benefit the community as a location for COVID-19 testing. Seeds of comity were sown between the church and its community, seeds that are continually being nurtured.

5. Preach in and out of season

Creativity in worship and ministry attracts people. During the pandemic, people learned to surf the internet and find many options for speakers. What will keep them connected to the local church is a personal touch, warmth, and offering hope and creativity in the worship service.

Pastor Winston Taylor in Knoxville, Tennessee, shared that he learned to minister in season and out of season (see 2 Tim. 4:2). The gist of Paul's sentiment speaks to preaching in good times and in the absence

thereof. Taylor put his worship services on various social media to be played multiple times. He conducted a Bible study at ten o'clock every morning and an evangelistic meeting at noon and seven o'clock in the evening every day for two months during the pandemic. Taylor told us that to be effective today, you need to redefine *church* from being a building to being a community of believers who can gather together under any kind of circumstance, time, and condition. Several people expressed interest in knowing about God. They have since been baptized.

Some pastors advertised on social media for Bible study, evangelistic meetings, and worship services. The more the pastors and members were intentional, the more the people were connected to the local church. Pastor Rodney Mills, executive secretary of the Upper Columbia Conference, noted that, in spite of total lockdown in Washington State, several Spanish-speaking pastors conducted virtual evangelic meetings that resulted in several baptisms. He stated, "Pastors and members partnered together to reach their communities with great impact and result. Such may not have ever transpired had it not been for new opportunities afforded as a result of the novel coronavirus."

Jim John, pastor of the Anchorage Northside church, demonstrates that if we depend on the Holy Spirit, asking God for guidance, there is no limit to what He can do through us. Jim and his wife, Darla, felt impressed by God to convert the Anchorage Junior Academy parking area into a church. They built a stage, found some old radio equipment at the Alaska Conference office, put some signs up, and advertised the start of worship services on the first Sabbath in May. Approximately 50 cars were coming to the

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worship service with about 150 people (up from an attendance of 120). Over time, the number grew to about 70 cars with about 200 people in attendance.

Jim and Darla would greet the people after the worship service and, practicing social distancing and wearing masks, pray with those who requested it. One day, Jim saw a new car and made it a point to get to know the people inside of it. They were nominal Christians who wanted to study the Bible during the lockdown. They discovered the Sabbath, started coming to the drive-in church, and eventually were baptized. So far, the church has baptized eight people. We may sit and do nothing or be used by God to do great things.

6. Utilize the influence of young and old

Sue Fattic from Niles, Michigan, started a ministry to reach out to elderly persons afraid to leave their homes for fear of catching COVID-19. She provided financial assistance or rides and purchased necessary groceries or anything else they needed.

Zoey Shiu, a dorm student at Andrews University, asked one of her friends in the community to open their home for her to conduct a Bible study on Sabbath mornings. The friends also offered to provide breakfast. Today about 10–20 university students attend her Bible study.

7. Pray as if your life depends on it

Prayer is the essential key ingredient for releasing God's power on behalf of His people. We came across many churches that took prayer seriously and moved their prayer meetings to the Zoom platform—only to experience growth in attendance. We suspect that using the remote platform will lend itself to greater increases in attendance, especially in colder climates, as people appreciate that the prayer ministry has been brought to them rather than their having to leave the house to attend prayer service.

Victor Jaeger, a pastor in Columbia, South Carolina, arrived at a church where, before the pandemic struck, the attendance was 60 people. Its church school was struggling. But through prayer and total dependence on God, the attendance today is 80 people, and 23 new students are coming to school this year.

Winston Taylor started multiple prayer meetings throughout the week to pray for healing and for spiritual strength. He called it "Comfort My People," based on Isaiah 40:1. He saw amazing

miracles take place, including the healing of his wife and sister from COVID-19. I (Joseph) participated in one of his prayer meetings, and I can attest to the powerful, life-changing elements of these worship experiences.

Heartfelt and earnest intercession is the key to breakthrough in our churches and effecting revival. By living a life connected to God and standing strong in God's truth, we work together with Him to determine our churches' futures. We should fervently pray for our neighborhoods and cities, especially during these unprecedented times, and rest in the assurance that positive change will transpire.

Greater things

Among Jesus' final words to His disciples were what we refer to as the Great Commission (see Matt. 28:19), His command to make disciples of all people groups. Curiously overlooked in this divine directive is the first of several Greek participles, simplistically translated as "Go." It would be better translated as "After you have gone . . ." Rather than to wait for the right time for people to come to us, is this biblically and practically the right time for us to go to them? Would Jesus allow social distancing to hinder His ministry? Would He redefine His approach in light of the need for physical distancing? We noticed that the more the church reached out to touch lives, the more the people became receptive to church attendance and giving of their funds and time.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many challenges on us but also created many possibilities and opportunities. Pastors and members got together and unleashed the God-given creativity of their members. They figured out ways to do things that they never dreamed were possible. Synergy, innovation, and thinking outside the box have led to creating new ways to reach people with the grace of Jesus. Greater things remain for God's people to accomplish because we have the promise that God is faithful, and He will not leave us alone.

"So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand"
(Isa. 41:10, NIV).

The pandemic serves as a reminder that God remains in control.



1 Ellen G. White, Letter 19, 1901.