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TIGERS OR STRAWBERRIES

Seizing the New Mission Opportunities Before Us for Church and Campus

Ronald Pickell, DMin

ABSTRACT

The context of my ministry is LIFE Adventist Church in Berkeley, California, a campus church near the University of California, Berkeley. I also provide leadership direction for Adventist Public Campus Ministry across the North American Division. This paper addresses the ministry challenge and opportunity for our mission forward following the COVID-19 Pandemic. For many churches and mission programs, the COVID-19 Pandemic was a huge interruption of their entire operation. In many ways, for us COVID-19 was more of a disruption rather than a complete interruption of ministry. This paper discusses the factors that contributed to the continuation of our ministry at LIFE Adventist Church, and also for other students attending non-Adventist college and university campuses across North America. It will include suggestions for moving forward at this time. The pandemic has opened numerous opportunities for ministry, including some right in front of us. Ways will be suggested to integrate these opportunities into a new strategic plan for advancing the Kingdom of God in our ministry context in this unique time.

THERE IS an ancient Zen story of the Tiger and the Strawberry (Kazmir 2020):

Once upon a time, as a man was walking through a forest, he saw a tiger peering out at him from the underbrush. As the man turned to run, he heard the tiger spring after him. Barely ahead of the tiger, running for his life, he came to the edge of a steep cliff. Clinging onto a strong vine, he climbed over the edge just as the tiger was about to pounce. Hanging over the side of the cliff, with the hungry tiger pacing above him, the man looked down and was dismayed to see another tiger, stalking the ravine far below. Just then, a tiny mouse darted out from a crack in the cliff face above him and began to gnaw at the vine. At that precise moment, the

man noticed a patch of wild strawberries growing from a clump of earth near where he was dangling. Reaching out, he plucked one. It was plump, juicy and perfectly ripe prepared by the beautiful warm sunshine. What about the tigers and the mouse? He popped the strawberry into his mouth. It was perfectly delightful. The end!

Most of us felt the COVID-19 tiger fast on our heels since March 2020 with the mouse gnawing away the thin vaccine vine we hoped would reach us before falling into the jaws of the hungry tiger below. These gripping fears continue to chase us. As the author of the Buddhist koan laments, “There is no staying off that cliff; there is no avoiding the tigers forever. The mouse of inexorable time

is chewing away at our lifeline moment by moment. The only choice is whether or not we will notice, eat, and enjoy the strawberry” (Kazmir 2020).

I don’t know where you were when the tiger leapt from behind the bush and the whirling globe we call Earth came to a screeching halt. I was in Los Angeles preparing for a meeting at our union office. One evening my son and I ate tacos from a tasty Mexican restaurant and the next morning, due to overnight imposed social distancing, we had to order takeout for breakfast. The planet seemed to have shifted overnight. Streets that were crowded the day before were now empty, and stores were bare. People kept their distance. The world stayed home, and millions of people became sick and died!

I would never have predicted the pandemic would last a year, but in the two years that followed we learned to do everything we could to fend off the tiger. But more importantly, we also discovered some very tasty strawberries.

Jesus once shared His own tiger vs. the strawberry story in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6). He cautioned regarding anxiety about our life—what we eat, drink, and wear. The secret to a carefree life is to view the strawberry of God’s kingdom clearly within our reach rather than to worry about these other things that cause so much stress. “Seek first the kingdom,” Jesus said, “and all these other things would take care of themselves” (Matt 6:33). During COVID-19 we learned to either fixate on the tiger above, the tiger beneath, the gnawing mouse eating away our lifeline, or we found the strawberry and took a bite of the kingdom.

We each had our tigers over the last couple of years—COVID-19 being the main hairy beast nipping at our heels, with some added ones peculiar to each of us. Mine was a home improvement project gone bad and a dishonest incompetent contractor. But the big one was the widow maker that stopped my heart three times, almost ended my life, and resulted in a triple bypass surgery a few weeks later. I’ll never know how the failed deck repair contributed to the heart attack, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it did. However, in all these life-changing events I learned to savor the strawberries right in front of me. Here’s my fruit-filled list:

1. *Breathe*: I learned to stop and catch my breath. I stopped traveling, going to church, eating out, going, going, going! I literally didn’t go anywhere for months. I stayed at home, worked

on rebuilding my deck, and spent time with my family. With life on COVID-19 pause, I learned to seek first the kingdom as Jesus instructed us to do. I walked our dogs in the morning and afternoon until the park was closed due to COVID-19. I just learned to breathe again.

2. *Simple and Organic*: Our lives became simpler and cleaner. We ordered a water purifier and lots of hand sanitizer. We planted tomatoes, kale, and butter lettuce.
3. *Less is More*: We learned that life doesn’t consist in having more, but in enjoying the simple things we have like being together, playing music, and catching up on our lives.
4. *Family*: All our children were home for a few months—which may never happen again. We had quite a reunion that brought its own gnawing mouse to our vine, but in the end, turned out to be a wonderful strawberry morsel. In many ways, it was a taste of the Kingdom.
5. *Relationships*: COVID-19 changed the way we relate to one another. This past weekend I saw people I had not seen in person for two years or more. I learned to value those I love even more and to miss seeing them in person. Due to my health issues, I also learned how much others love and appreciate me. As a pastor, I am used to caring for others, but I had to learn to allow complete strangers to care for me. The personal relationships I discovered during the pandemic were some of my most delicious strawberries—right in front of me all the time, but my busy frantic life had kept me from enjoying them.
6. *Virtual*: Zoom, Gather Town, and social media became ways to stay virtually connected—strawberries that kept us together when we found ourselves physically out of reach. We learned during the pandemic that COVID-19 could keep us apart, but not disconnected. We did zoom church, zoom committee meetings, zoom conferences, zoom Bible studies. We even did zoom classrooms. But we also learned that zoom was not the same as a hug, a handshake, or being together in the same room. For instance, we learned that even though we could still host our weekly church service online, we

could not do it in the same programmatic way we had in person. Our service became less of a production and more of a forum/discussion type of online Sabbath School—something we have continued even after meeting again in person.

7. *Hybrid*: Connecting in person and online has become a new way of life since the pandemic. Students formed bubbles of their own groups that stayed connected by means of in-person hangouts and online. Student leaders from Georgia and East Tennessee developed an ACF Playbook providing helpful suggestions on how to continue campus ministry efforts through in-person, virtual, and hybrid gatherings. The ACF COVID-19 Campus Ministry Playbook can be found at www.acflink.org/resources. We also conducted virtual ACF ministry training Institutes that helped keep students connected across the NAD (North American Division). The Institute provided helpful suggestions for providing online small group and hybrid campus ministry training. We gave a special focus to issues of anxiety and depression—a huge issue on campus among students during the pandemic.
8. *Balance*: The pandemic was also a lesson in moderation or balance. Those who refused to mask up, get the vaccine, or social distance were much more susceptible to the virus and even death. For many, common sense was a strawberry lifesaver. Facts don't lie. According to the CDC hospitalizations and death were one-third for those fully vaccinated and boosted with the omicron variant and one-fourth of the delta variant (CDC 2022). We learned that the virus did not care about our politics. Those who took common sense approaches fared much better than those who dug in their heels and tried to imagine the virus away.
9. *Improvise*: Learning to improvise was another nourishing strawberry that kept us going in spite of the threatening COVID-19 tiger. The pandemic taught us that church is more than a program or a building. We learned that spirituality is both personal and communal. Maintaining our connection with God and with one

another proved to be the important thing. The mission of God didn't halt simply because we couldn't gather in person in a church building. We learned how to conduct services and to gather for worship in new and different ways. Our students continued to gather online every Friday evening. Our church family gathered online on Sabbath mornings. We started a weekly online prayer time. Four new online and hybrid small groups gathered weekly. Worship pivoted to more of an interactive experience in which everyone participated in a discussion format. In fact, our virtual service was so popular that we have continued some aspects of it as we began meeting again in person. Our current weekly service is more of a sermon/discussion forum including video and speaker interview of the sermon passage. We also have become more intentional about our online presence which includes area service promotion on You Verse Events <https://www.bible.com/events/48877635> and hosting each service on Facebook Live <https://www.facebook.com/LIFEACB>. Through social media we have been able to grow our online audience more-or-less planting another virtual church.

10. *Trust*: Perhaps the sweetest COVID-19 strawberry was a greater dependence on God and one another. Church attendance is less than before the pandemic. We have lost contact with many people, but we have also gained some great new connections. Our church family does not look the same as it did before the pounce of the COVID-19 tiger. As Thom S. Rainer wrote in *Simple Church In A Post-COVID World*, "We have to be prepared to lose people" (Rainer 2021, 25).

Ultimately, we must remember that the church is God's agency for the advancement of His kingdom on earth. The church is not the kingdom. It proclaims the kingdom. We are only *His* disciples and here to do *His* bidding. He requests that we trust Him and be faithful in our efforts. God will take care of the pluses and minuses.

These are some of the strawberries that nourished us throughout the pandemic. These same juicy morsels also help make up the menu that will sustain us moving forward regardless of the tigers charging down our path. One

thing I'm sure—COVID-19 has forever changed the landscape of our lives. We are not going back, and many of the things listed above are here to stay.

Carey Nieuwhof, a best-selling leadership author, speaker, podcaster, and church planter listed twelve disruptive trends destined to rule 2022 and the Post-Pandemic era. Watch for these whether you care for the spiritual needs of church members or university students:

1. *Demise of the old model of church*—"The current approach to church not only isn't effective; it hasn't been for decades. Yet leaders keep moving forward as though somehow things are going to turn around. Optimism is one thing; delusion is another."
2. *Growing churches will innovate beyond weekend services*—"Many churches function like restaurants that decide if you want to eat, it can only happen in a one-hour window and only in this particular building, and if you miss it, you miss it."
3. *The vision for the future will become clear*—"Not all churches will find a new vision, but those who do will have a brighter future. Ironically, as you know, the vision of the future has been there all along because the vision of the church doesn't change that much. The core of the church's vision is always evangelism and discipleship."
4. *Attendance will normalize and you'll have a new church*—"In 2022, the constant cycle of hope and disappointment (of fluctuating church participation) will give way to the new reality that this is your church. These are the people you will build the future alongside. Which is just in time, because you can't build the future of your church when you're living in the past."
5. *Hybrid church will simply become church*—"People have lived in the slipstream of digital and in-real-life for well over a decade now, and church leaders will realize that church online is both a necessity and an opportunity."
6. *In-Person will become more personal*—"In the future, treating people like numbers will get you declining numbers and not much more. The goal is not to have a church where everyone

knows everybody. The point is to have a church where everyone is known."

7. *Information will move online, and transformation move to In-Person*—"In 2022, many church leaders will likely realize that the best lane for information is online, while more transformational, transcendent experiences are more likely to happen in-person. They'll design their online ministry and in-person experiences accordingly."
8. *Location-Independent church members will increase*—"Location independence is part of the fluid world we now live in. Leaders who adapt quickly will reach more people."
9. *Pastors will sense a diminished authority*—"As the world has become more connected, power has shifted from institutions to networks. Real authority doesn't spring from an office, a title, or power. It springs from humility, love, and a clear sense of how the Kingdom of God is advancing in the world. Leaders who show those kinds of characteristics will have a bright future."
10. *The brain drain will become acute*—"The challenges ahead in a fractured world facing existential threats (not to mention the philosophical and theological questions artificial intelligence raises) will require some very sharp minds. The future church will require leaders with great hearts and leaders with great minds."
11. *The exit of uninvested investors (A recalibration in giving)*—"What you might see this year is a ramping up of new people who start to give while uninvested investors disappear entirely."
12. *Less predictability*—"As COVID-19 fades, we enter into a new era of instability and unpredictability, which most of us have never known in our lifetime. The approach that got many leaders through the pandemic (flexibility and agility) will be required for years to come. The 'set it and forget it' approach to leadership that worked in stable areas won't work anymore."

If we are going to be successful in the mission God has given us in this disruptive new world, we would do well to take note of these changing trends. We are also going to need to lean into many of the areas that got us through

the pandemic like those mentioned above. Here are some of the main ones I want to highlight as we press forward into the new post-pandemic world:

1. *Family First*: If COVID-19 has taught me nothing else it has certainly taught me this—family is our number one priority, and we do not know how much time any of us have on the planet. Our family member connections are the strawberries right in front of us. Going forward we need to concentrate on the relationships most within our reach.
2. *Relationship Intention*: Moving forward we must stay connected to people. A weekly service or church newsletter is necessary but will not be enough if we want relationships to go deeper than Instagram. Students need personal contact if they are going to know that we care and have an interest in them beyond their spiritual life. They need to see that we are interested in them whether or not they are consistent in campus fellowship or fill a church pew.
3. *Technology*: Virtual is here to stay, and we need to learn how to use it effectively and authentically to supplement our overall program. Carey Nieuwhof’s Blog on Christian leadership again reminds us that hybrid church is simply becoming church in 2022. Any church going into the future that does not have an online presence is fast becoming a relic.
4. *Common Sense*: We need a balanced approach in ministry as we move forward. The anxiety tiger behind us and before us can keep us so stressed that we freeze like deer in the headlights and do nothing. Any kind of movement is better than standing still and getting eaten by the tiger. Ministry is still about people. Our best ministry strawberry right in front of us is the art of listening and remembering that everyone is unique and special. The old saying that people don’t care how much we know until they know how much we care continues to be true and will still be true after the pandemic fades behind us.
5. *Change*: A good friend once reminded me that people are not so much afraid of change as they are afraid of loss. Since COVID-19 everything has changed, and the changes seem

to continue. Our mission to a world that does not know Christ will also have to change if we are going to be in touch with the fears and losses impacting people. As many have pointed out, the tiger that has been chasing us has also brought us into contact with many people we would never have connected with offline. In fact, three of the largest online evangelism ministries—Global Media Outreach, Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, and Cru—account cumulatively for at least 200 million gospel presentations on the internet each year. All three say the number of people seeking online information about knowing Jesus has increased since the COVID-19 outbreak (Roach 2020). We need to ask questions such as “What is God doing now in these times of great upheaval?” and, “How can we leverage the disruption to point people to the Kingdom of God and away from a mediocre life and empty religion?”

6. *Trust*: The religious establishment seemed like a tiger that chased the Early Church. The secular state and possibility of martyrdom looked like a tiger menacing in front of them. Their dangling mouse gnawing at their vine of faith could have been persecution and doubt. Like the Early Church, we must open our eyes to the Kingdom of God right in front of us—the delicious strawberry and the only thing we truly have and can trust. In a word, the pandemic has reminded us of the truth—we have to lose our lives in order to save them. M. Craig Barnes wrote, “God is always working just beyond our limits, inviting us to venture into the unknown where we are abandoned by everything—especially by our prior expectations of God” (1996, Kindle 227-228).

And again, “We are converted to a great mission that outlives us. We now work for the coming kingdom of Jesus Christ that was on the way before we arrived and will continue to come long after we are gone. In familiar words of St. Augustine, ‘Nothing worth doing can be accomplished in one’s lifetime (Barnes 1996, Kindle 241-241).’”

The Kingdom of God is the strawberry that we have—the only certainty in our uncertain world. It is the strawberry placed right in front of us with the tiger of fear behind and the tiger of doubt just ahead. We may wonder about the

minute details of what to do next, but in the meantime let's reach for the radical mission and message of Jesus—the delectable strawberry available to all, online, in-person, and given in the most tasteful manner.

We may wonder about the future of the church and what it will look like in the days ahead, but the church that recaptures God's mission in the world of advancing His kingdom will be less concerned with itself, its buildings,

institutions, programs, and positions of leadership, and more about the mission and message of Jesus. God's kingdom is the ever-relevant mission of the church—the strawberry God has placed before us, our real escape from the tigers and the mouse and the continuing want of the world.

Please, eat the strawberry!

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