

Rethinking Normal: Making the most of our golden opportunity to start again.

Anxious to get your church back to normal? You could miss the most effective ministry season of your life.



Dumpster Day? Wait, what? I wondered to myself.

Sitting in on a Zoom meeting with the leadership team of a small church I'm coaching, they were discussing what to do after sheltering in place. I couldn't help but ask.

"Could someone please fill me in on Dumpster Day?" I learned that Dumpster Day started years ago as a Community Yard Sale. But now it was simply a day when church members were encouraged to bring their unwanted junk to the church and toss it in a dumpster in exchange for a donation. The team thought it would be timely with all the quaran-cleaning happening these days. I get that. I'd been doing a little quaran-cleaning myself.

"Ok, so, why you do it?" I continued. Awkward silence on Zoom. Finally, team members offered that it was something they'd always done and the contributions helped. In short, this ministry which was launched years ago as a way to reach people turned into a fund-raiser for church members. And now, they were doing it again because it is what they normally did. They were trying to get back to normal.

We all understand that. C-19 has surfaced feelings of uncertainty, confusion, and fear in all of us. Every week brought new, conflicting information and concerns. "How contagious is C-19? Will my loved ones get it? Will I lose my job? Does wearing a mask help...or not...this week?" So much

uncertainty. Getting back to normal sounds really good. But, as the media keeps reminding us, we're entering a new normal.

Rethinking Normal

Don't miss this. *This restart into a new normal is a golden, God-given opportunity to re-focus on the mission God has given your church.* Our churches so easily get side-tracked from the fundamentals of discipleship – reaching people and helping them become growing followers of Jesus.

This next month or two offers a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for churches to re-think normal. This is a perfect time to review your activities to make certain they directly contribute to helping people meet and follow Jesus. Before discussing what we “can” do in this new normal, we need to ask what we “should” do in this new season. Here are four questions to talk through with your team to help you rethink normal:

1. What is the mission of the church?

The mission of every church is essentially the same - to glorify God by making more and better disciples. Making disciples, baptizing them, and teaching them to do the things our Lord taught us to do is our mandate from the King of Kings. Individual churches say it different ways, but that's the bottom line. In the words of one Harvard student, “Our job is to turn pagans into missionaries.” When Jesus returns, He will not ask church leaders how big their ministry grew, how they met budget, or whether their streaming and production platforms were seamless. He will ask whether we were faithful to make new disciples and grow them to His glory. That's it.

Our nation is deeply divided about many things these days. From the best way to approach C-19 issues to racial and socio-economic inequity, it seems everyone, from the President to individual church members, has an opinion about what churches should do these days. Right now, our churches are vulnerable to division. Reminding your leaders and congregants of our God-given mission helps keep those important issues in perspective to the main thing...making disciples. Refocusing on our mission may just save your church from a lot of unnecessary pain.

Take some time with your church's leadership team to refocus on our mission as you emerge from sheltering in place. Remind them that we can't do everything we used to do. Help them see the opportunity here to rethink normal for your church. Then, simply open the Scriptures to passages such as Matthew 28:18-20, and say, “As we restart into this new normal, what does Jesus tell us to do?”

2. What are the marks of a disciple at our church?

Ask your leadership team, “What are the marks of a growing disciple of Jesus Christ?” As you look at Scripture together, you'll find that followers of Jesus believe and follow Him (John 8:31-32), grow in Christ-like character (Galatians 5:22-24), serve others (John 13:12-15), help the underprivileged (Matthew 25:34-40), live in authentic community (1 Peter 4:8-11), among others traits. Each church needs to identify their own primary marks of a growing disciple for their own context.

A great discussion for your leadership team prior to launching into your new normal is, “What, exactly, are we trying to produce in the life of a follower of Jesus? What does a disciple of Jesus look like in this post-pandemic world of ours?” The discussion doesn't have to be long, but I guarantee you, it will be helpful.

3. Which ministries are truly effective at making disciples?

“Evaluate your ministry programs.” Easy to write - hard to do. As you think through this, stop focusing on group attendance and begin focusing on steps of individual progress. These steps might include someone putting their faith in Christ, committing to serve others regularly, joining a community group, starting daily Bible reading, or giving for the first time. When you focus on movement instead of attendance, you get closer to identifying ministries that are truly making and developing disciples

Use “Start, Stop, Continue” to review your ministries. Assign each of your activities to one of three columns:

- **Start: Activities that your team needs to start doing in this new normal so as to directly contribute to making new and better disciples.**

For instance, if your church is plateaued or hasn't seen conversion growth in the last couple of years, that's a problem! Now's your God-given chance to fix that trend.

Unless churches are intentional about being externally-focused, they tend to turn “inward” – focusing primarily on teaching and fellowship. Rethinking normal gives your church a chance to ask the questions, “How is God calling us to serve the community in which He has placed us? How can we make sure more people hear the Good News and be given opportunity to respond? How will this ministry impact those who are not here yet?”

The same thing holds true for any of the “marks of a disciple” that you want to see in the life of a believer. Now is your chance to launch a ministry that can make that characteristic a reality.

- **Stop: Activities that your team should not restart because they don't really make disciples.**

There are things that your church has always done but doesn't really change lives. Sometimes we've simply kept doing them because...well, because they are what we've always done. Sometimes it is to placate a church power broker. Sometimes for fear of blowback. But, now is the time to stop doing those things. If the ministry you are doing does not lead the majority of the people involved into immediate concrete steps of faith, put it in the “stop” column.

- **Continue: Activities that contribute to the core of making disciples and should continue.**

Identify those ministry activities that directly contribute to people making steps in their spiritual growth and lean into those activities. Put your resources, staff, volunteers, and communication focus there! The more your church simplifies and focuses on these core ministries in the new normal, the better!

4. How do we reengage the new normal at our church?

Tony Morgan of the Unstuck Group recently highlighted several church/societal trends that have surfaced because of C-19. He pointed out that C-19 didn't start new trends, but rather, accelerated them. Society was already going from analog to digital. C-19 just made it faster. Culture had stopped pushing people toward the church some time ago. C-19 just made it “official.” People were already

doing video calls and document sharing. C-19 just made everyone do it now! (How many of us became Zoom experts in a week?!)

As the church, we need to leverage the great things we learned about ministry while sheltering in place. By necessity, we learned how to engage people through technology. We equipped people so they could use spiritual growth materials in their own homes. We met practical needs of the underprivileged in our community. We re-learned how to call and pray for each other over the phone. In many ways, we got back to the basics of what it means to be the church. Most of all, we had opportunity to tell our friends, families, and co-workers of the hope we have in Jesus Christ no matter the circumstance. All of this needs to fall under the “continue” column in the new normal.

As the leadership team of that church discussed the purpose of Dumpster Day over that Zoom call, I encouraged them to remember the mission of the church, review whether to start, stop, or continue the activity. If they did continue, I encouraged them to be sure it's in a way that contributes directly to reaching the community and making disciples. If they do go ahead and serve their community through Dumpster Day, I've got some more quaran-cleaning to do!

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