

ARTICLE

How some churches are responding to the “shelter-in-place” regulations

An interview with two pastors in California

BY DANIEL DARLING

March 30, 2020

I asked two California pastors currently serving through local “shelter-in-place” regulations to share what their reality is like as they lead through the COVID-19 crisis. Pastor DJ Jenkins with Anthology Church of Studio City in Los Angeles, and Pastor Alan Cross with Petaluma Valley Baptist Church in Northern California share their answers below.

Dan Darling: Will you describe your church and surrounding community for us?

DJ Jenkins: With the help of the Send Network, our local association, numerous churches, and countless individual givers, Anthology Church was planted back in the fall of 2012 when our team moved to this influential neighborhood of Los Angeles. Studio City is a community of around 40,000 people, many of whom work in the movie and television industry. It's a family-friendly place with a high percentage of progressive-minded folks, many of them from a Jewish background, along with many of the other transplants common to LA. It's a place where the majority of people are very far away from a Christian worldview.

After two years of getting to know the community, serving in practical ways, sharing the good news of Jesus, and meeting in our home, we began to meet publicly in our local recreation center. Since then, we have slowly grown through the ebbs and flows of LA life. We have a membership of 12 and an average service of 30-40. We like to say we are doing ministry "along the path," referring to the hardest soil in Jesus' parable of the sower (Matt.13:1-23).

Alan Cross: Petaluma Valley Baptist Church is a multigenerational church of around 300 members and attenders founded in Petaluma, California, in the late 1940s. We are in south Sonoma County in the North Bay of the San Francisco Bay Area. Our city has around 60,000 people, with 500,000 people in Sonoma County and 250,000 people in Marin County directly to the south of us. Our area is largely unchurched with a very small evangelical influence. I arrived here to pastor last spring from Alabama, and my family has been settling in with work, school, and activities over the past 9 months.

DD: How has church life changed since the COVID-19 crisis and state “shelter-in-place” notifications?

DJ: In some ways, nearly everything has changed. The city of LA and the state of California both issued versions of “shelter-in-place” orders last week, but before that had already closed city recreation centers. Since we meet in a rec center, we were forced to shift our Sunday gatherings. Our team immediately made quick plans to create a Zoom livestream service, complete with multiple cameras, worship slides, and all the regular aspects of our Sunday services, save the practice of communion. We have an introduction, songs for corporate worship, a Scripture reading, a corporate prayer, a sermon, and time for announcements. For us, the “face-to-face” opportunities a Zoom livestream provides over a taped worship service are worth the live production from our separate living rooms. In addition, we’ve moved our small groups to Zoom and added some Zoom prayer meetings throughout the week. We’ve also begun to utilize the Slack platform to create more community and try to foster more continual interaction.

AC: The San Francisco Bay Area took strong measures to call for social distancing and isolation a few weeks ago. Sonoma County recommended no meetings larger than 50 early on and then put forward a “shelter-in-place” order last week, which means that all unessential gatherings and work must cease as people are encouraged to stay at home. Our church staff and leaders began preparing for this weeks ago as we saw the news about the coronavirus spreading around the world, so we were prepared when the “shelter-in-place” order came.

Seeing “community” happen through a computer or phone screen and people caring for one another and sharing the good news of Jesus reminds me that God is on his throne and is not shaken, though our church structures have shifted greatly.

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We did not have online church options before this, but our staff quickly mobilized and moved all of our church ministries online. We use YouTube Live to livestream our Sunday service, and we are using Zoom for our Bible studies, small groups, prayer times, staff and leader group communication, and church-wide meetings. We are using Facebook and Instagram, along with email, to let people know what is happening with the new weekly schedule of online meetings. And, we are calling people and encouraging folks in the church to reach out to others daily.

DD: What’s the most challenging part of pastoring through this crisis?

DJ: I struggle with how to best take on the responsibility to care for our members and shepherd them in light of not being able to meet face to face. I’m especially sensitive and concerned about our single members who don’t have anyone at home and are isolated. In addition, our older members have a more difficult time with technology, so it’s been a challenge to help them get on the various platforms. In many ways, I’m just as busy as I was before (I’m in my final semester of my M.Div. at Gateway Seminary), and now my children and wife are all at home together as we seek to adjust to the new reality of school and work from home. The emotional stress is greater in this new reality. In addition, we are wrestling through how we reach out to the community when we can’t meet people or gather anywhere.

AC: I am struck with the weight of making sure people are cared for and of trying to stay at least one step ahead of a rapidly changing situation. We want to continue to minister to people and hold out the gospel while also not endangering our people. So, we have had to think ahead, plan, use the tools in our hands, innovate rapidly, and develop platforms and structures that enable us to connect the church together in ways alternative to in-person meetings.

Then, there is the weight of what is happening, my concern for my people, prayers for their health and protection, concern for their jobs and livelihoods, and also the grief that comes with the church being scattered. While we are working hard to keep everyone connected and to keep ministering to people, this past Sunday was hard for me. After preaching and the worship service, I looked out into an empty sanctuary and grieved the church that was not there. They were in their homes in isolation for their good, but I missed the body of Christ worshiping God and feasting on his Word together. One day soon, we will be together again.

DD: How are you finding hope amid the chaos?

DJ: I've sensed the Lord at work in significant ways in my own heart and in others in fresh ways. Seeing "community" happen through a computer or phone screen and people caring for one another and sharing the good news of Jesus reminds me that God is on his throne and is not shaken, though our church structures have shifted greatly. So far, I think our people have adjusted well as a church. The majority of our members and regular attenders have all been meeting together virtually. Also, I'm incredibly thankful for our leadership team of two pastors and three deacons who have come together and worked hard to meet all the changing needs. I could never do it alone!

AC: God is at work in the midst of all of this. I am hearing stories of answered prayers, people in our community tuning in to our livestream who would not normally go to church, and church members ministering to and encouraging one another. I am praying for and with people who are pressing into God and focusing on him. There is a seriousness that has come upon us and an awareness that we need to be the church right now for each other and for our community. And, my goodness, my staff. They have been amazing. They have worked, innovated, labored, prayed, and have transitioned the church to a solid footing in the last few weeks with an amazing attitude. I am also just taking time to appreciate my family and the amazing blessings that God has given me in allowing me to pastor here in this moment in time.

DD: How can people pray for regular pastors like you?

DJ: In many ways, the same way you always pray for us. Pray God draws us near to himself, that we lead and plan and teach out of faith in him and dependence on his power and strength, not our own. Pray especially for our emotional health as we are burdened with the needs of our church and communities. And pray for wisdom—so many practical decisions have to be made around finances and Easter and the future in a world where every day seems to be a new reality. Thank you, and God bless you!

AC: We have been telling one another that God is not surprised by any of this, that we are not to fear, that we are to trust God, that we are to seek wisdom and have humility, and that we are to rejoice in the Lord. Please pray that I [am]e5 able to continue to do that. Sleep is becoming more difficult as I am

praying and thinking through all that needs to be done each day and night. The burden of caring for souls in the midst of this is heavy. How do we stay ahead of this so we can continue to lead and not be overwhelmed by what is going on?

The people in our community are feeling anxious over what's to come. As the number of the coronavirus cases grows and the economic impact of this settles in, we want to minister hope to our community, and I want to love my church well and point them to Jesus. Our hope is in the Lord, but pray that we keep our eyes focused on Jesus and not on the wind and waves around us, and pray that we would tell a better story of hope, grace, and the love of God in the midst of these trials.



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Daniel Darling is the senior vice president of communications for National Religious Broadcasters. He is a contributor to Christianity Today, In Touch and a columnist for Homelife. His works has appeared in The Washington Post, CNN, Huffington Post, Washington Times, OnFaith, and The Gospel Coalition. Daniel is the host of ... [Read More \(https://erlc.com/multi_author/daniel-darling/\)](https://erlc.com/multi_author/daniel-darling/)

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