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## Churches in Tokyo, Italy experience 'Gospel renewal' adapting to online discipleship

by Grace Thornton/Southern Baptist TEXAN, posted Monday, April 20, 2020 (7 days ago)

TOKYO -- On normal days, Pastor Joey Zorina is keenly aware that his church, The Bridge Fellowship in Tokyo, is like a tiny candle flickering in a very dark place.

The gravity of that truth is even stronger now that he feels a bit like he's having to keep that light to himself.

"In a country of less than 1 percent Christian population, we are saddened that we cannot meet onsite in person," said Zorina, whose church -- like many others around the world -- now meets online because of COVID-19 gathering restrictions.

"It has affected how we seek to disciple others and build relationships with our non-Christian friends," he said. "Since our church is located in an artistic neighborhood, we have many musicians and their friends in our outreaches. That had to be postponed for the future."

But Zorina can see a glimmer of light in this crisis -- one he hopes sticks around even after the doors are reopened.

"When we were meeting offline, we did not have the chance to hear from everybody, as conversations were more scattered in different corners of the room during our Sunday gathering," he said. "But after meeting online, it forced us to see who is missing on the screen, who is cared for and who is sick or needs encouragement, and the whole community has taken the responsibility to listen well and extend pastoral care to everyone."

They're able to ask how everyone is doing and pray specifically and personally for each other, he said.

"We are also able to slow down with a renewed community rhythm and pace, learning to be patient and confront the idols of control and repent and rest joyfully in the Gospel," Zorina said. "You could say this is a Gospel renewal, or at least the start of one."

Loren Holland, pastor of Rome International Church, said the COVID-19 gathering restrictions have done unexpected things for his congregation's ongoing discipleship also.

"Rome in particular is a really difficult city to gather in," he said. "People are very, very busy. They work hard, and they're pulled in different directions constantly. Public transit also makes it difficult."

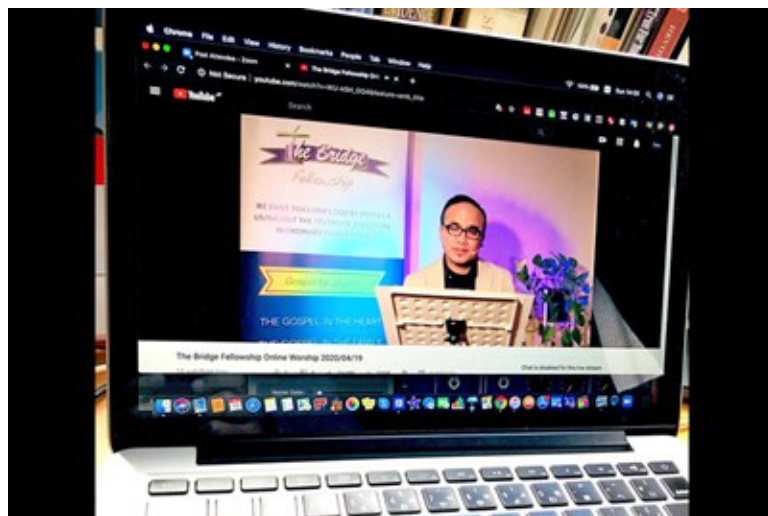
Holland, a missionary kid and graduate of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, said he lives six miles from the Colosseum, but it takes an hour and a half to get there from his home. Dealing with those kinds of transportation issues makes it tricky to gather people together for small groups during the week.

But he said meeting on Zoom has knocked down some of those barriers.

"Doing things online like this has made me think that this is something we could do -- not permanently [for church gatherings] -- but we could use it more often for meetings and discipleship," Holland said.

The church's men's and women's groups are going strong, and the crisis has provided Holland a chance to reconnect with a family who stopped coming to the church about a year ago.

He's also seeing spiritual growth in the way church members are praying as a result of the pandemic.



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"One of the important parts of discipleship is living alongside other believers who can see and measure how you're growing. That can be a challenge when we're not serving side by side in things," Holland said. "But one of the rudimentary ways I'm seeing that happen is through our once-a-week prayer times and hearing how people are praying differently than they used to pray. Their prayers are showing how they're going deeper."

Zorina said he and other leaders at The Bridge Fellowship are using this time when nonessentials are stripped away to reevaluate what is essential. As they use the "God-given gifts" of online streaming services, they are praying about what they should stop doing once the crisis has passed.

"We believe that we will come out stronger as our relationships are forged in the furnace of the COVID-19 pandemic," he said. "We were surprised to find that our church is a sticky group -- we have not lost any of our regular attenders and members even after going online. The sense of family and camaraderie is still there."

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Grace Thornton is a freelance writer in Birmingham.