

FIRST-PERSON: Missional means in light of COVID-19

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DULUTH, Ga. (BP) -- By now there are very few places untouched by the lifestyle changes required to adjust to COVID-19. Travel restrictions and social distancing seem to be common bywords, and that affects how we think about missions in the near future.

So how does an evangelical Christian balance the call to be missional and yet maintain a social responsibility in a pandemic situation?

William Carey is called the father of the modern missions movement. When Carey first introduced his "Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens" in the late 18th century, his treatise was not given a warm reception by every single church member. In fact, some felt that living missionally through "means" was antithetical to faith in God's sovereignty. However, the Bible and church history side with Carey to teach us that to follow Christ is to use the means He gives for the moment He

allows.

When Jesus commissioned the first 120 believers of Jerusalem with the task of global mission (Matt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; 1:15), He knew some of them would be impeded from actually getting out of town (Luke 21:12). The persecution He promised, though, would still be a part of His plan to put the Gospel in front of kings and governors. It would simply be a different means of getting His message where He wanted it go.

Paul's missionary method sometimes involved going on trips, but sometimes it involved staying to train others (Acts 19:9-10). Moreover, Paul did missions even when his Roman imprisonment delayed him from "going" to Spain (Rom. 15:24), especially as some of the most missional epistles were written during this time. The perceived delays simply opened up a different means for the spread of the Gospel.

With current social distancing, we now meet a more formidable opponent to our usual face-to-face missional experiences. Flights are cancelled. Borders are closed. So, what should we use to continue living out the Great Commission? I'd like to propose four means:

1. Personal Technology. We now have at our disposal the technological means for communication in a way that Paul couldn't dream. William Carey may have had no idea that the 21st century would be granted with such technological advances that we might literally reach any single lost soul in the world within minutes.

Our phones still work. We can call friends living overseas and be acquainted with their friends with similar likes or careers. We can talk to church leaders in Peru, pastors in Ecuador, or deacons in Guatemala with words of encouragement and/or training. And personally, we can find a long-distance friend with whom we can share the gospel.

Snail mail with care packages are still being delivered. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected normal delivery into some countries, but packages are still arriving. We should stay in touch with career missionaries still at work on their fields. Your international missionaries would still love to receive some goodies that they cannot get on shelves in country, and sometimes that opens up into shared culinary experiences and Gospel conversations with their lost neighbors.

Email/Teleconferencing is still a great option. Facebook may be banned in some closed countries, but video calling still has wide-reaching impact with partner churches in other places. Many churches have a translator who can help in video communications, and Facebook offers translation to and from English into another language.

Social Media posting/videos can also become viral. We may never know how influential a simple Gospel message or video to an international friend can be. Some people become believers through the Gospel shared through social media, whether that's a blog, webcast, or a simple Facebook post.

2. Church greetings. There is something therapeutic in knowing you're not alone. In Paul's letters, he showered the churches with greetings to and from other believers. Now is a great time to share encouraging news from our brothers/sisters in other places. Your Georgia Baptist regional missions consultant can help connect your church with another church in a missional partnership, perhaps starting with a simple "hello."

3. Public prayer requests. Now is the time to share our prayer concerns with partner churches, whether they are in another state in the U.S. or another country. Our churches can commit to praying for specific needs that are shared. Missionaries would love to share their own concerns and the needs of the churches around them. This too is missional and biblical, and often the Lord uses what we're praying about to instigate our own tangible involvement at the appropriate time.

4. Missions planning for later trips. In the off-season, a farmer still works in preparing his equipment to be effective during harvest time. Though actual going may have been stalled by this coronavirus, our intentionality and planning should still move forward. Just as the Lord used the delays in the first century believers to bring them before governors and kings, He may be using this pandemic situation to redirect us to places we had not dreamed up to this point.

Even though now is the time for us to be at home, now is not the time to stop our obedience to the Great Commission. Our attitudes shouldn't remain inwardly focused. This may be the greatest opportunity to use new media for world evangelization and to show a Great Commission heart to the rest of the world. We still have a great missional task, and we've been given a great means to fulfill it.

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