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## New York City churches serve as COVID-19 crisis worsens

by Tobin Perry, posted Tuesday, March 31, 2020 (27 days ago)

NEW YORK, N.Y. (BP) -- When the COVID-19 pandemic began hitting New York City last month, the leaders of Bridge Community Church in Queens, N.Y., wanted to help. As a small one-year-old church plant, they knew they could not do everything.

They could, however, do something.

Michael Hill, a Southern Baptist church-planting missionary with the North American Mission Board (NAMB), said the church decided to focus on five specific areas: prayer, creating daily 60-second videos of hope, picking up supplies for people who couldn't get out, providing a sense of connection for the lonely in quarantine and serving frontline workers who needed to work.

On Saturday (March 28), Bridge Community Church partnered with Jackson Heights Community Church to collect needed supplies for healthcare workers. Hill said that despite rainy weather and the numerous obstacles of organizing a collection drive in the middle of a quarantine, they were pleased with the results and will continue to collect supplies in the weeks to come.

"Ultimately, this is what we've been called here to do," Hill said. He moved to the city in 2017 from Lakeview Baptist in Auburn, Ala., where he served as college pastor. "We moved specifically to New York City to share the hope and love that exists through Jesus only. So, we press into this season, where this pandemic is taking hold of our city. Those are the things people are looking for. They're looking for hope. They're hungry for peace. They want to have that joy in life."

The Bridge Community Church is among a number of Southern Baptist churches in New York serving the city in the midst of one of its darkest periods.

The city has become the epicenter of the United States' battle against the COVID-19 pandemic. More than a third of U.S. cases and deaths have been in the city. Some hospitals are becoming overrun with patients. Over the weekend, the New York Post reported that the city was experiencing a COVID-19 related death every 9.5 minutes.

Taylor Field is a Send Relief missionary and pastor of Graffiti Church located on the Lower East Side of New York City. He said Graffiti Church has first focused on serving people with whom they already had a connection. For example, the church has had opportunities to serve a number of families that were already involved in its tutoring ministry.

Graffiti has a long history of ministering to the city's homeless population. This weekend, its ministry served 2,000 ready-to-eat meals to the homeless. Typically, Field said, the church has gathered the homeless to feed them, but because of the pandemic, it has been serving grab-and-go meals. North Carolina and Pennsylvania-South Jersey Southern Baptists have pitched in by sending meals for Graffiti to distribute. The Send Relief Ministry Center in Ashland, Ky., also provided meals.

"People are rallying around to help," Field said. "It's humbling to see that there is this crisis across our nation, but still people are thinking about New York City where people are just on top of each other."

In the process of serving the homeless, Field added, they have needed to teach social distancing and hygiene techniques as they distribute the food. When they distributed food last Thursday, the church marked lines on the sidewalk every six feet to show how far people needed to stand away from one another.



Bridge Community Church, a Southern Baptist Church plant in New York City, collects medical supplies for those on the front line of the COVID-19 pandemic. The church is providing the supplies to two local hospitals, Elmhurst and Mount Sinai Queens, both heavily impacted by the COVID-19 crisis.

Photo provided by Bridge Community Church



Volunteers with Graffiti Church in New York City hand out meals to people in need in the city over the weekend. Last week, Send Relief provided more than 6,000 family meals to Graffiti through the Appalachia Ministry Center, and an additional 6,000 meals for Graffiti 2, another Southern Baptist church in the city.

Photo provided by Graffiti Church

As Baptist Press reported last Thursday, Long Island City pastor Patrick Thompson, who later tested positive for COVID-19, co-founded a ministry that has been active in feeding New Yorkers during the pandemic. In its first 10 days of existence, the ministry raised \$35,000 and recruited 120 volunteers.

Terry Robertson, the executive director of the New York Baptist Convention, said many churches were struggling with the inability to meet and worship together. Because most of the state's pastors are bi-vocational, he added, many churches will face additional stress as these pastors lose their other sources of income.

"The economic impact is going to be enormous on churches," Robertson said. "One pastor said to me in a prayer call this morning that he was not sure what his church will look like within two weeks. He might be the only person in his church to be employed."

Despite the struggles, Southern Baptist churches in the state are coming together to help their communities through the crisis. For example, Robertson noted, many churches in the state are mobilizing to sew masks for those on the frontlines of the epidemic. He also described how one pastor and his family shared a meal with an elderly couple, though they were separated by a screen door.

"We've got a lot of folks that are doing some really good, effective ministry right now," Robertson said. "But they're having to learn how to do it differently than we've ever done before."

Jeremiah Brinkman, the regional coordinator of disaster relief for the metro New York area, said Southern Baptists are working in partnership with a variety of other organizations to bring hope and healing to the city during this time.

"We're not currently deploying feeding kitchens like we might in other disasters like a hurricane or a tornado or something like that," Brinkman said. "But what we are doing is taking those volunteers and redeploying them to partner organizations. We're finding that many of the organizations that already have programs in place for feeding the vulnerable or feeding in low-income areas -- they are having issues with delivery and distribution. So, we have a lot of agencies out there we can work with to fulfill that mission by utilizing our volunteers and our church members."

Won Kwak, NAMB's Send City missionary for New York City, said he realizes that churches throughout the nation have their own challenges during this time, but he encourages Southern Baptists to continue to pray for churches and church plants in the city.

"New York City is the epicenter of the coronavirus in America," Kwok said. "My prayer is that metro New York City churches will be the epicenters of help and hope in Christ Jesus."

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