

Two weeks ago we learned from a pastor in Singapore and this week let's take in what a pastor from Spain has experienced and wants to teach us. Enjoy!

## Surviving COVID-19 in Spain Changed My Faith

Six lessons for churches from the president of the Spanish Evangelical Alliance.

MARCOS ZAPATA APRIL 21, 2020 FROM CHRSTIANITY TODAY

Spain is going through the worst crisis we can remember since our country became a modern democracy 40 years ago. The new coronavirus has killed more than 21,000 people and infected at least 200,000. Our evangelical congregations have not been spared in this pandemic, and I am among those who were hospitalized with COVID-19.

I pastor a church of 350 people in a small city on the Atlantic coast. I also serve as a national leader of my denomination and as the president of the Spanish Evangelical Alliance. But I was stopped in my tracks after I was infected. After 21 days of fighting the disease both at home and in the hospital, I received a medical discharge. I was thankful and full of joy; I was also very conscious that others, even younger and healthier than me, had lost their lives.

As a country, we are still suffering as we walk toward an uncertain future. In my own family, people are still fighting the virus—including my wife and my mother-in-law. But here are six lessons based on our experience in Spain so far of striving to love God and neighbor well amid a pandemic.

### 1. Let's remember we are not invincible.

The first conclusion is for those who, like me, are in Christian leadership. The obvious lesson as I was recovering was to remember that I am not superhuman. As pastors, we live in the same world as everyone else, with the same conflicts and risks. We are vulnerable—and this is precisely what qualifies us for leadership.

The leadership by those who seem alien to suffering will never produce disciples but only admirers. My time of suffering and fighting against the illness has reminded me once again that the Father already sent a Savior—and it is not me.

Falling ill also showed me afresh the importance of belonging to a community. As people learned about my infection, there was an immediate reaction of prayer in my local church, in churches across Spain, and even in other parts of the world. Friends and people I hadn't met before sent messages of support and prayers of faith and love. All of these were doses of encouragement in my most difficult hours.

In those days, I was able to confirm the truth of the Word that we are a body—one body. We have a common faith and we are a family. All this is not something abstract on paper or a theory we will see someday in the future, but a palpable reality now. This is what sustains those of us who are suffering.

### 2. Let's re-examine our own lives.

When you are involved in a church that is growing in numbers, with social projects, church planting, etc., unexpected illness comes as a sudden, unwanted pause to many things. Initially it is a shock, and later come the phases of anger, bargaining, and, finally, acceptance. Illness leads to a personal process that, if

everything goes well, can last for hours or days. At the beginning, I had doubts about the purpose of my suffering through COVID-19. But after I accepted my situation, I gained two insights.

The first was how God has cared for and still cares about me. In the days when I was severely ill, I had to consider death a possible reality. How would I evaluate my life? In the area of ministry and profession, I was at peace; I had done what I had been able to in the time God had given me. But sorrow appeared as I thought of my children. Would I be able to see how they reach their own dreams and goals? Even so, there was the quiet peace of knowing that God would care for my wife and my sons if I died.

The second was identifying with the pain of so many people who are going through the same suffering. It is invaluable what illness can bring to your soul if you are ready to let God expand your heart in the process. I firmly believe that God is powerful enough to heal me, just as he was powerful enough to save me. And I do not believe illness is a punishment sent by God. But as I waited in faith for his healing—directly or through medical means—I could better understand that others were suffering as well. I could sympathize with them, and I realized that God continued to be Lord, no matter what was going to happen to me.

### **3. Let's not toy with triumphalist theologies.**

If my platform can be used for something, I hope it is at least to ask our Christian brothers and sisters in the Americas to learn from our mistakes in Europe. Sadly the United States is already living the reality of this pandemic, and I hope our beloved countries in Latin America keep and broaden the measures that have been put in place.

We saw the crisis in China and we said, “This is in China; it is far away,” and we did not prepare. Then it was in Italy and we said, “It is in Italy; it will not come to Spain.” In fact, some soccer fans even traveled to the worst infected area of the neighboring nation to attend a Champions League game. (The competition was later suspended and is now irrelevant.)

Days later, COVID-19 landed in Madrid, and those of us who live in other parts of Spain once again said, “That is in the capital; we are safe,” and we were not prudent. Finally it arrived in our city and among our own families. We were slow to react, and we paid the consequences. Please, learn from our mistakes and take this pandemic very seriously.

Churches have a fundamental role to play in responding with wisdom to this crisis. The problem we are witnessing is a weak theology that teaches caution conflicts with faith—a triumphalist theology that claims we are immune to the virus because of our faith. From this flows ideas such as Christians not having to obey the guidelines of the authorities because God will protect us. This is a gross mistake, and it will have disastrous consequences. The pastors who preach these things will have to give an account to God and to men for their teachings.

### **4. Let's accompany those who mourn.**

In Spain, we have seen hundreds of health care centers overwhelmed with what medical and military personnel describe as an “environment of war.” Christian doctors and nurses [told us](#) about how they cried as they arrived home after long working days. There have not been enough staff, not enough protective equipment, not enough ICU beds, and more. And they are aware of the severe emotional impact this pandemic will have on our society in the years to come.

In our churches, we have also had to hastily say final goodbyes to many believers. Most of those who have gone to glory in the past few weeks were parents and grandparents of a generation that fought to build our

evangelical communities. Many died alone in a hospital room, saying goodbye to their loved ones by phone. Although we have a shared hope that goes beyond death, the way they left us still leaves wounds.

We have to re-learn to accompany people in their process of mourning, Christians and otherwise. The health authorities are asking families to authorize the incineration of their relatives. A phone call gives instructions about how to pick up the ashes and the death report. It is as if the victims of COVID-19 have suddenly just disappeared from our lives.

Many who were not allowed to be with their loved ones in their final moments will have to deal with feelings of guilt and anger. Tens of thousands will never see the body of their loved ones, not even the coffin. Families will not be able to fit their loss—the absence—into concrete form.

How do we express mourning without a funeral rite or a ceremony? We have to equip people to express grief at a distance. Our evangelical alliance is already working on a guide to mourning in these strange times.

## **5. Let's return to the essentials, starting with community.**

Activities that bring people together in physical spaces have been banned across Europe, and there is not a clear timeline for when governments will allow worship places to resume their activities.

This tests our way of *being* the church. Churches that already had a good structure for small groups will better preserve a sense of community—as well as pastoral care and mission work—in this time of crisis. And, of course, the technologies and communication systems available on the internet are a blessing.

But Christian leaders have to use this crisis to rethink church from a communal point of view. The center is not the worship service, or the Sunday gathering, but Christ. Once this crisis ends, it will be important to return to a cellular structure for church that emphasizes personal commitment and puts an end to the religious consumerism of recent decades.

The priorities that emerge now are clear. First, in the words of Galatians 6:10, we need to “do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” We need to be very watchful to make sure that no brother or sister suffers financially, emotionally, or socially. After that, we should also broaden this concern to the neighborhoods and cities we live in.

This is also a time to maintain our pastoral work in every area, including the care of children, youth, marriages, and our common worship. In our local church, we celebrated Easter Sunday at a distance with *#santacenaibnlugo*: All of us took part in the Lord's Supper from our homes and shared photos using that hashtag.

We have always preached that a church is not a building or a place but a people. COVID-19 will be the crucible to test this assertion, our theology, and our church structures.

## **6. Let's be alive and active churches, more than ever before.**

We live in a broken world in need of Christians who accept the call to be light and salt. This is how, through our witness, many will be able to give glory to God.

Allow me to end with an example of the church I lead. Ours is not a very big congregation, and we are in a rural city of about 100,000 inhabitants. We could think that we are weak and small in the face of this pandemic. And the crisis has also considerably reduced the financial income of our church. Nevertheless, we have been able to increase our social aid to alleviate the effects of the crisis among neighboring families. We

try to apply Mathew 5:16, which says, “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

In our case, this has meant developing an action plan with three facets. The first is emergency help, providing financial assistance to the most vulnerable families. The second is a food distribution program. We deliver 3 tons of fresh produce every 15 days and will deliver 72 tons of nonperishable food in the days to come. Thanks to our network built over the past few years, we are now reaching 900 families—or about 3,000 people—with this help.

The third is a new line of ministry we’ve started relating to health supplies. This is possible thanks to nine members of our local church who sew hospital gowns, shoe covers, and caps. They do it with a raw material that is easy to find: plastic bags.

We have already given some of these to health centers and nursing homes, where they were much needed. The reaction in the local media has been significant from the beginning, and that has led to an increase in the number of orders. Medical staff and nurses have expressed their gratitude and congratulations for the quality of the work. We expect to make more than 2,000 each of gowns, caps, and shoe covers in the coming weeks.

We will end this program when resources promised by the government arrive to these places. But meanwhile, we will continue serving our community.

It is true that we are confined—but the Holy Spirit is not confined. And as Christians, we continue to be part of the life of society around us amid this crisis. It is time to show that “the church is alive and active.” This motto of our church will keep our members focused in the weeks to come. I pray it can inspire yours also.

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