

stuff you wish they taught in seminary



5 Questions About COVID-19
**that Your Church Might Still
Need to Answer**

RICH BIRCH



One of the core takeaways from 2020 so far is that we all have lacked the imagination needed to see over the horizon.

Who would've thought that this year would bring all the challenges that it has as it relates to coronavirus?

Oftentimes people say that no one could have predicted this, that no one could have seen what was coming, **but that's not entirely true.**

During my Christmas break at the end of 2019, I read Dan Carlin's book, [The End Is Always Near: Apocalyptic Moments, from the Bronze Age Collapse to Nuclear Near Misses](#). It was an interesting romp through history looking at apocalyptic times and the turnover of cultures. Dan ends the book by turning to the future and offering a discussion on lessons from the Spanish flu pandemic as well as the potential for a supervirus to bring our world to its knees once again.

While Dan's analysis doesn't completely reflect everything that's been happening this year, he did actually provide a fairly robust roadmap to help us navigate a pandemic. He had the imagination to apply what has happened historically to what could happen again. It felt a bit farfetched way back in December but he seems like a prophet from this side of the story.

Our job is to stretch our imaginations to think about what could happen in the coming weeks, months and even years. **One of our functions as leaders is to read the winds of our times and**

change the sails of our organizations to steer towards where we believe God is leading us next.

As we navigate the current phase we're in, we need to think about where we're going in the future. **This season has taught us that we need to use our imaginations to look over the horizon at what might be ahead for our churches, especially as we wrestle with the reality of COVID-19 still impacting our communities and economies.** One of our advantages is that we can look back and learn from similar events such as the Spanish flu and see how the multiple waves of the pandemic impacted those communities. While life is different now, a historical perspective does provide some guideposts for us as we think about what may be coming in the next few months.

Recently, I spent some time looking at case studies of three cities during the Spanish flu pandemic to get a sense of how the churches at that time responded and if we could learn from that response. I'd encourage you to do the same. I found these three articles to be particularly helpful:

- Pittsburgh, PA: ["Closed houses of worship served during 1918 flu pandemic"](#)
- Minneapolis, MN: ["Lessons Learned from the 1918-1919 Influenza Pandemic"](#)
- Washington, D.C.: ["What Did DC Churches Do When the Spanish Flu Struck Again?"](#)

In the spirit of thinking about where we may be going next, here are five questions that our churches may need to wrestle with in the coming months. Use these as a guide for discussion as you and your leadership team consider the impending issues that we find ourselves dealing with.

Would you lend your church building as a vaccine center?

It is clear that if a vaccine comes into safe and widespread use, there's going to be a problem around how our health systems actually distribute these vaccines. Surely we're not going to be able to just line up at our doctor's office or the local hospital. Those spaces aren't large enough and aren't built to process a large number of people in a short period of time.

However, most church buildings are designed to get people in and out quickly, and we have ample parking and large open spaces that can easily be converted. During the Spanish flu, churches were converted into hospitals and became a great way to serve their communities.

If a vaccine does become available, it's going to be required by at least 70% of the population. That's hundreds of millions of people in the United States alone! **Will our churches be counted among those that are willing to offer help in a time like this?**



In a similar vein, **would your church be willing to offer its building to the local school board as they attempt to figure out how to do lower capacity classes this September?** This could be an opportunity for your church to help your community in a very real way right now. Most churches have meeting rooms and various subspaces for our weekend services. These could easily be retrofitted to help a school provide low-capacity classes for kids in your district.

Are we willing to communicate well in the public square?

Are you ready to respond to the press if your church becomes a hotspot?

One of the things that's become obvious in responding to COVID-19 is that public perception is an important factor that all leaders need to consider. I know many church leaders have wrestled with not wanting to gather too early because they want to keep their community healthy and safe.

At some point, if your church does decide to meet in person, **it would be irresponsible to not have a press communication plan in place in the event a member of your church becomes COVID-19 positive or, worst case, if your church becomes a super spreader.** We've already seen evidence of this in churches around the world, and the negative effect that has been felt by these churches could impact their ministries for years to come.

Taking some time now to build a communications plan that clearly outlines what would happen if a case is identified in your church will help you avoid pain in the future.

Throughout this season, I've been encouraging churches to think proactively about hiring a communications director. This issue alone may be the biggest reason to push you to make those hires at this time.

Are your systems designed to move smoothly from in-person to online experiences in response to a second wave?

It's highly likely that we will see a continued resurgence of COVID-19 across the country in the coming weeks and months. As your church transitions to in-person services, are you retaining all of your systems to be able to transition smoothly back to online when needed?

Don't abandon the infrastructure that you have developed in this season. This is important for the individuals in your church who are uncomfortable

coming back and because there may come a point when churches need to be closed a second time. Think carefully about how you could do both in-person and online experiences since you might need to provide a mixed offering for the foreseeable future.



The rush to in-person gatherings and the cheerleading that has gone along with that will potentially have negative consequences for those churches in the event that they need to return to online only experiences. **Every church should be considering how to do both in-person and online well and should have the ability to move its community back and forth between the two.**

What would happen to your giving if your city's main employer closed?

The economic impact of the coronavirus hasn't shown up yet, not really. The government liquidity that has been pushed into the system is giving a false sense of financial security against what's actually happening on Main Street.

What would happen if that liquidity was pulled and the main employer in your town was to fail? What would the ripple effect be in your town if that employer went bankrupt and was unable to pay its people?

Recently, I was in a "company town," one of these rural-ish communities that are largely reliant on a large multinational corporation to support their local economy. That company has been an incredible blessing to the financial picture of this community for years, but I got a

little bit scared when I saw how much development has radiated out from that employer. If that company was to pull out of that town, it would take decades for the community to recover.

Are you aware of who the main employer is in your town or city? Have you thought about any way that you could support them in this season? Are you aware of what impact it might have on your church if they were to close?

What if your volunteers don't come back?

One of the saddest things we've been seeing in this season as churches attempt to get in-person services going again is the assumption that all of the volunteers feel just as strongly about in-person services as the pastoral team. **This just simply isn't the case.**

The many people who over the last few months haven't been serving in our churches and haven't heard from us personally will be put off if the next time they hear from you, it's just about the church needing them to volunteer again. **What if 50% of your volunteers opted out of volunteering in your rush to move back to in-person services?** Could your church sustain its ministry with far less volunteers?

This is a significant issue for us to wrestle through because our churches are driven by volunteers. The church has always been best understood as a volunteer organization, and **the local church is the greatest volunteer-driven enterprise in the world.** If our volunteers don't come back, we will have a big problem on our hands when we reopen. Watching carefully as people opt out will be an important practice for us as we go through our reopening phases.



Make Some Space to Ask, “What if?”

This season feels like we just ran a marathon and then at the end of the marathon, someone handed us a bike and told us this is actually a reverse triathlon. I don't want this discussion to be a discouragement to you; rather, I want to encourage you to think carefully about the future.



There will be many waves of the impact of COVID-19 that we'll need to continue to deal with as they roll through our churches. Part of our roles as leaders is to try to look up over the horizon and discover and think through and imagine where we may be headed next, to rally our team towards those issues, and to do what we can to prepare for them.

Visit unseminary.com for more free resources!

