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Weathering the Perfect Storm

Jul 10, 2020 | Arkansas United Methodist



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It wasn't supposed to last this long.

The pandemic and its concomitant tragedies should have been over in weeks, maybe a couple of months, right? Now over four months into it, the cases, hospitalizations and deaths are still on the increase. If the end is in sight, it is a far distant pinpoint of light in a long, dark tunnel.

I have been reminded of the book and movie from 20 years ago called “The Perfect Storm,” about a fishing boat caught in the convergence of three weather masses in the North Atlantic, creating the most powerful storm ever. The coronavirus health emergency would have been disaster enough, but it precipitated an economic collapse unlike anything since the Great Depression. Then, even as we realized that the virus was striking minorities at levels twice the national average, George Floyd was murdered by a policeman in broad daylight with video recording, igniting a storm of protest across America and the world.

If we plan to be followers of Jesus in this perfectly stormy time, we had better develop some disciplines for the long haul. The pandemic, economic collapse, and racial tension are going to take months, if not years, to abate. How can we continue to live with faith, hope, and love in these times?

John Wesley’s three rules certainly apply here: “Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God.” Keep your personal connection of discipleship alive and growing in the midst of the storm. Online worship is not as good as being there; attend anyway. You may miss your Sunday School class or small group; meet online or join another group to study and pray. Keep in touch with your church friends with texts, emails, or go old school and call them. If we hope to emerge on the other side intact, we have to act with intention to stay strong on the journey.

A second strategy is to continue reaching out to share love with your community. It is easy in these times to succumb to “missional paralysis,” just to hunker down and get through it until things get back to normal. News flash: there will be no going back to normal. If churches are going to survive the present moment, we have to find ways to continue our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ, regardless of our circumstances. Our communities need missional churches. Food banks and blood banks and every helping agency in your town are needing support because so many people are hurting. Find ways to reach beyond the church building to connect with children and youth, some of whom may not be in your church. (We have kids “attending” our VBS-at-home from hundreds of miles away.) Missional paralysis can lead to ecclesial *rigor mortis*—avoid!

Third, we need to listen more than speak. The calamities of the day require a constant ear to God. But we also need to listen to others who are speaking out of experiences that are different from ours. In particular, we white Christians need to listen to the prophetic words being spoken right now from Black and Latino voices. Until we understand that despite the progress that has been made toward racial justice in the last 75 years, we have still been raised in a culture that makes it harder for people of color to thrive, we will not undo the fundamental inequalities we still experience. There are laws on the books legislating equality, but there has not been the love in our hearts to make it happen.

These issues will not resolve quickly. But we can build on the positive steps of the past and make progress together toward the beloved community of which Dr. King spoke.

There are forces in our midst today that seek to divide and create chaos and hatred. We must do what we can to make sure that kind of thinking loses and love wins.

It's going to take longer than we thought for the perfect storm to subside. But no matter how long it takes, God is still going to be with us. In fact, stormy times are when God's best work happens. Speaking out of a stormy time in the history of Israel, God spoke through the prophet Isaiah, "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness."

I know it's hard. It's exhausting. Everything is different, and different takes two extra steps. Our creativity is being stretched to the breaking point. But this changing landscape is forcing us to find new ways of being the church, new definitions of discipleship, new strategies for reaching lost and broken people. Some of these changes will be permanent, and we are going to have to adapt.

The other night I was watching a National Geographic documentary called "Wild Hawaii." Not a surfer film, it was about the unique species of plants and animals in the Hawaiian archipelago. Early in the show, the narrator, his voice full of *gravitas*, asked and answered his own question: "How do these species survive in this harsh environment built on volcanic soil? Adapt, or die." That is the task of the church in a perfect storm: adapt or die.

The road before us is anything but clear. But there is a way in the wilderness; it has been prepared by God for us.

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