

Sustaining Practices

Martin Rhodes with Carol Tobin

We're being given a glimpse of an alternative world. It's a time of testing and discerning. It's not permanent. How can we not receive it as an opportunity?" These words from pastor Sam Wells in the webinar "Soul-Tending in a Virtual Age: How to Preach, Pastor, and Disciple in these Challenging Times" challenge the church's preoccupation with petty issues when such a thing as COVID-19 is bringing its tsunami of change upon us.

Indeed, it is time for the church to shrug off all that hinders it so that it can equip disciples of Jesus to run the race that is set before us. We must ask, "What are the new opportunities?" and "What are the hindrances that need to be thrown off?"—not so that we can get back to normal, but so that we can engage in a life of mission to the world.

As our Virginia Mennonite Missions' workers and church planters have reflected on these questions, the following emerged:

1. **Worship.** We are learning that the vibrancy of the church and individual spiritual lives is nurtured not primarily by grandly orchestrated Sunday services, but by many small acts of devotion and piety. In the busyness of life, it's easy to jettison the simple life-giving rhythms of daily prayer and scripture reading that anchor us as we abide with Christ. We notice that with rekindled prayer lives, there is an overwhelming impulse to share this connection with others, in prayer over the phone, text, and Zoom.
2. **Small groups.** It's the middle of winter and church buildings are closed. And yet the church gathers. Chairs encircle a backyard fire ring and people bundled in coats and scarves gather to read the Bible, pray, and sing. Although physical distancing is required, we are committed to being socially together. And where two or three are gathered, there the Lord is, in our midst. Our workers insist, "We must find ways to be together creatively and in public." As we fill our neighborhoods with the hope-filled praises of God's people, our neighbors will see and hear and be drawn.
3. **Going door-to-door.** We might negatively associate this practice with intrusive sales pitches, religious or otherwise. But our workers are discovering what a gift it is to show up with a simple question: "How can we help?" In times of sickness and plague, Christians have always shown up to nurse people back to health. In our time, loneliness is the real plague; we are learning that we can be present to our neighbors to relieve the sickness of soul that loneliness and isolation bring.

COMMENDED PRACTICES

1. Create margin/sabbath spaces for reflection, worship, and prayer.
2. Create new family rhythms, allowing the family to become a microcosm of the church through worship, fellowship, and outreach to neighbors.
3. Reactivate the priesthood of all believers by encouraging sharing and prayer together by phone and text and Zoom.
4. Go public in your neighborhoods—offering backyard or other outdoor meals, special events like ice cream socials, providing contexts for meeting and combating loneliness and isolation.
5. Continue to make spaces for individual and corporate lament and intercession for others in pain.



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