

# **In Age of COVID-19, One of Two Futures for Your Church - Part 1**

The crisis resulting from the COVID-19 virus has taken us off the rails we thought were permanent and dependable.

Congregations are facing a future we have no precedent for or roadmap to navigate.

There is a sense of disorientation, fear and bewilderment among leaders and judicatories that are trying to manage a life they never imagined or prepared for.

Each morning, we awake wondering, "What can possibly happen today?" In fact, "managing life" is becoming an oxymoron as we increasingly feel out of control of what is happening to us.

There is also a sense we are facing a crisis that, while portrayed as a medical or financial dilemma, may also be a crisis that requires a faith perspective to fully meet the challenge.

Fear, loneliness, social isolation, food insecurity, job viability, along with heightened anxiety and dread are now a daily reality for many people whose lives were relatively stable just three weeks ago.

Congregations face a future radically different from what they imagined at the dawn of 2020. Looking ahead, with a nod to Charles Dickens, one can make a good case this is both the worst of times and the best of times for congregations.

As to the worst of times ...

The great fear is that this dual crisis of health and finances will hit congregations hard in areas we are weakest.

Many established congregations are comprised of a majority of senior adults. This population is especially susceptible to the ravages of the virus.

If the current trend lines hold, some of our most reliable and regular members are facing major medical challenges.

Even if the illness spares them, it will impact their quality of life and may affect their willingness to engage fully in public activities for a very long time.

“Flattening the curve” is a strategy for stretching out the onset of the virus so that medical facilities can manage the surge in needed services.

It also means the outbreak of the virus will stretch out over many months, rather than a few weeks.

This will mean it will probably be months before the “all clear” signal is given to return to regular routines, such as church attendance. When we do, things will look very different.

Many churches in America run on very thin financial margins.

Congregational reserves are modest at best, and fixed costs dominate most congregational budgets. Many established churches simply do not have the capacity to absorb a major loss of income over more than a few weeks.

Our reserves have been dwindling as our churches have plateaued and declined over the last two decades, and many of us find ourselves with more facilities than needed for the numbers of attenders.

Those facilities’ costs will continue unabated and may even escalate as deferred maintenance issues erupt and can no longer be deferred.

Many of our most devoted members live on investments and depend on resources threatened by the looming recession.

The financial fear that a recession/depression brings may cause some of our most trustworthy financial supporters to pull back on their giving habits.

Concerns about the efficiency of online giving to make up the loss of financial support that physical attendance brings are legitimate.

Every pastor dreads the loss of a “snow Sunday” offering that never quite equals a normal Sunday’s income.

The inevitable decline in receipts we all face means a sort of financial triage will be necessary for each church.

We learned in 2008 that deep cutbacks in spending generally mean support for denominational and mission entities will rapidly decline, and layoffs and cutting of staff support or positions will soon follow.

Some observers of American church life have been predicting the trend lines of the last 30 years pointed toward the closure of between a fourth and a third of existing congregations by 2035.

Our current crisis may accelerate those trend lines to the point we have less time to get our affairs in order than we had thought. Think months, not years.

The harsh reality is the parallel financial crisis and health tsunami may wash away some of our churches who have “preexisting and underlying conditions” making them particularly vulnerable to the future we are facing.

Many others may be crippled to the point of questioning their viability.

Whew. That nightmare scenario is painful even to put into words.

However, there is another way of imagining the future, and for that, let’s assume we are entering a season of remarkable opportunity for the church.

I’ll offer several “best of times” possibilities and opportunities for local churches in a second article tomorrow.

*Editor’s note: This article is the first of a two-part series. Part two is available [here](#).*