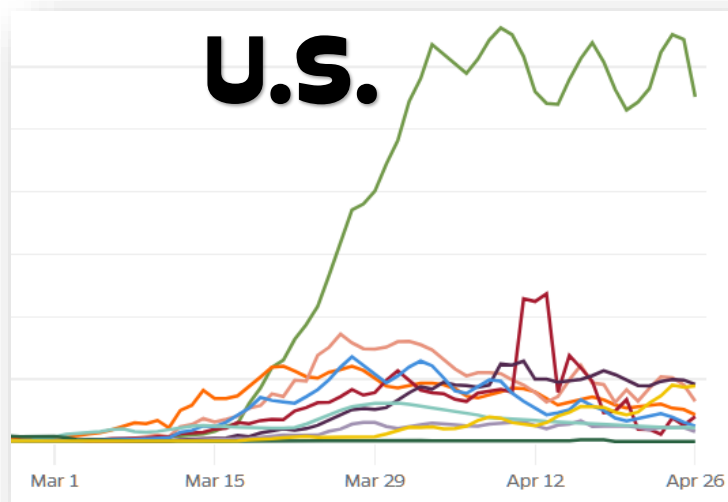


Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

April 28, 2020

As of the time I'm writing this on Tuesday evening, we are 95 days into the COVID-19 crisis in the United States.

According to the Johns Hopkins dashboard that the whole world is using, we have now more than 1 million diagnosed cases in the U.S.—and probably a good many more than that. We have now had well over 56,000 deaths . . . more deaths than we sustained in the entire VietNam war . . . and there are likely a great many more COVID deaths that will never be identified as such (VietNam has so far not reported a single death from COVID).



There have been epidemics before . . . awful ones. But I don't think the entire planet has ever shut down more or less completely and all at once. This is all pretty incredible, and the economic fallout from these months of shutdown is likely to be incalculable.

We in the churches have never experienced anything like this, either, and there is no shortage of pundit verbiage trying to interpret how things will be post-COVID (if there is such a thing). Although Maryland cases continue to increase, the rate of increase may be slowing just a bit, and conversations are beginning about how and when and what to reopen.

There is no shortage of questions for us to answer for our congregation. Here are a few:

- Once OMI reopens, will we resume worship at that time, or at some later time? What criteria might we use in making that decision?
- How will we manage social distancing in worship? Before and after worship?
- What adjustments will we make with respect to our choirs—where they will sit, how they will sing, etc.?
- What adjustments will we make in receiving the offering or in taking Communion?
- How about baptism? How will we do that post-COVID?
- OMI will need extra time between services to sanitize chairs and wash rooms. How will we respond to that?
- Will we ever dare to eat together again? How will we handle Wednesdays?
- Will we still have a coffee shop on Sunday mornings?
- How will we handle social distancing in Bible Study? In youth group? In children's classes?
- Will we shake hands, hug, or have greeters ever again?

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And these are just the most obvious questions.

The changes we're experiencing have the potential to offer local congregations an opportunity to "reboot" or to push "reset." Churches are asking themselves new and probing questions about what's "essential" and what's not. As month after month of planned activities are cancelled, churches are deciding that some of those events should stay cancelled.

Andrew, Jenetha, J.W., Rebecca and I are learning a lot about video production in putting together each week's online worship service. It is much more complicated to do this than to video our live services and upload them. We appear to be reaching a larger audience in this fashion than we do in physical worship. Should we continue this new approach to online worship even after physical worship resumes?

Maybe we could offer a second service in a different style than our in-the-room service. That would involve serious increases in weekly time spent on worship preparation and delivery, and we'd have to rethink a bunch of stuff . . . but coming out of COVID, some churches are beginning to think of their online presence as a "multi-site" option as valid as an additional physical site. Virginia Baptists even have funds available for helping to underwrite such efforts.

We're conducting Bible Study and various church meetings these days using ZOOM (with 300 million other new users), and it's working pretty well. We're saving a lot of driving! Using ZOOM isn't like being in the room together, but it still works.



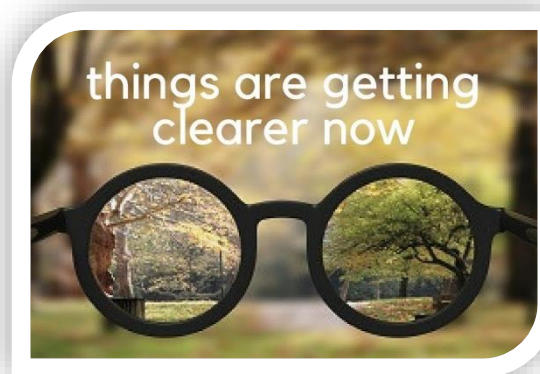
I wonder how much of that we'll keep doing? With the rest of the world, we're learning how to live without buildings and offices, and we're finding that we might not need all the things we thought we needed.

Our Lenten study groups asked three questions each week as we began:

- 1. What is clearer to you about God since we were last together?**
- 2. What is clearer to you about yourself since we were last together?**
- 3. What is clearer to you about our congregation since we were last together?**

How would you answer those questions today?

Dave



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