

A pastor's pandemic diary

## **I hope our little flock survives. But the church is nonessential to God's redemption of the world.**

by [Isaac S. Villegas](#) in the [June 3, 2020](#) issue



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### **March 16**

On Thursday our worship committee made the decision to cancel church. I had sent them a summary of the conversations I had with the medical professionals and hospital workers in our church to hear their sense of the COVID-19 crisis. All were extremely concerned. Two of the doctors said the United States was a week or two away from the desperate situation in Italy. The hospitals were panicked at the overwhelming wave on the horizon.

That afternoon I sent an email to our church: all services and meetings were canceled for the foreseeable future. I spent the rest of the day wondering if we were overreacting. I felt reassured when I saw other congregations making the same decision. There were outliers, of course—like the churches hosting healing services,

to try to combat the virus with a sanctuary full of people laying hands on the sick. Or my friend on Twitter who insisted that she would continue to offer daily Eucharist as a fulfillment of her priestly duty. She soon changed her tune and deleted that tweet.

Yesterday we used Zoom to host a meet-up for sharing and prayer, a regular part of our Sunday service. Thirty-one devices joined the call, with one to five people on each. I glanced around at the faces on the screen, little boxes holding so much anxiety. I welcomed people and invited them to share their prayer requests. So much was offered—so much concern for the world, so much love for neighbors near and far.

### **March 23**

I called the older members of our church this past week—a health and provisions check-in. I told them we could organize grocery store runs for them, to protect them from “community spread,” as the epidemiologists are calling it. The global data indicates that the virus poses far greater risk for older people.

I watched a news segment about college students on spring break in Florida, at the bars and on the beach, while the rest of us sequester ourselves at home. “If I get corona, I get corona. Whatever happens, happens,” an invincible young man says to a reporter.

“This virus isn’t that serious,” another spring-breaker claims. “I think they’re blowing it way out of proportion.” Their understanding of our crisis repeats the president’s dismissal of medical professionals’ warnings: “Now, this is just my hunch . . . a lot of people will have this, and it’s very mild. They’ll get better very rapidly.” When reporters ask him about the pandemic, he shifts to the economy, his mind always focused on money.

The president and the spring-breakers live in a different world from the young people at my church. Yesterday, in our junior high Sunday school class via Zoom, one of them talked about her social responsibility to stay at home for the sake of the elders, for their safety. This is how we love our neighbors, she said.

Ours is an idolatrous society, ready to abandon people deemed no longer useful.

Herbert McCabe interprets the fifth commandment (“honor your father and mother”) as developing the implications of the second (“no graven images”). To honor the

older generation is a commitment against idolatry. “This is not a commandment for children. . . . It has to do with the old,” McCabe writes in *Law, Love, and Language*. “To respect people just because they are images of the God of freedom even though they are no longer any ‘use’ is a test of the worship of [God] alone. The idolatrous society will characteristically neglect and try to forget the aged.”

We live in an idolatrous society, all too ready to abandon people deemed no longer to have what Karl Marx called “use-value.” In his *Grundrisse* notebooks, Marx diagnosed the economic pathology of capitalism as propitiation—the “sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an entirely external end.” For capitalism, the external end of economic growth determines the value of a human being. Actuaries quantify the worth of a life. A cost-benefit analysis decides which demographic will be sacrificed for the common good.

R. R. Reno is also willing to sacrifice people for external ends, which in his case are church services. Almost daily he implores readers at the *First Things* website to carry on with church gatherings because, as he puts it, “our end is in God”—as if God’s priorities are different from God’s loving care for human life, as if the glory of God is not the human being fully alive. The witness of Jesus calls us to lay down our lives for others, but not for a meeting, not for an economy. For Reno—like for Trump, like for capitalism—sometimes you have to run the numbers to see if it’s worth it.

### **March 30**

Our mayor announced a stay-at-home order early last week, and our governor followed with a statewide order that begins this evening. Rosa del Carmen is an undocumented woman who lives on church property as we defend her from ICE’s threat of detainment, which continues even after federal judges ruled in her favor in February ([see news story](#), March 9, 2020). At her request, we’ve asked volunteers and friends to refrain from visits. I’ll have to figure out safe protocols for people to drop off her groceries and her laundry. These two years in protective sanctuary have taken an emotional toll on her—separation from her community and from the daily life of her three young children, all of it the work of love. She fled Honduras over a decade ago after her partner stabbed through her abdomen. Rosa showed me her scar when she moved into church, a reminder in her flesh of the violence awaiting her if she was deported.

Last week ICE requested 45,000 N95 masks to be distributed to 25 of their field offices so their agents could continue to deport undocumented members of our communities. “We just have to continue to go with the same game plan that we’ve been doing,” said the ICE director in California. The president has spent billions of our dollars on border security, all as part of his effort to scapegoat foreigners as an existential threat to this society. While he was creating an image of brown people as dangerous, he was also disbanding the Global Health Security and Biodefense unit. Racism is a lie about the world that distorts the ability to recognize reality. This administration has left us unprepared for this virus, so here we are scrambling to survive.

A member of our city council called me yesterday to think through financial support for our undocumented neighbors who have lost jobs this week. Last year, after a series of ICE raids that devastated our community, she convened a group of us to strategize a grassroots response to the crisis. I took the lead in organizing a fund for families that no longer had income due to the detention or deportation of a household member. We distributed over \$50,000 last year.

Now we’ve decided to extend the fund to undocumented applicants who have suffered economic disaster from COVID-19—people who are not included in the CARES act, the relief bill just signed into law. Undocumented workers are taxpayers, yet they’re excluded from receiving these benefits from the government they help fund. As Rosa Luxemburg would say, our economic system is a vampire, living on income from people subjected to resource extraction, their bodily labor converted into a commodity.

Rosa del Carmen tells me that her relatives were laid off this past week, along with all the other people helping take care of her children. Factories have scaled back production, restaurants no longer have diners at their tables, and hotels lack the occupancy to keep workers on the payroll. I’ll find people to Venmo her some money to pass along to her family—a meager effort at a redistributive economy. I’ll see what happens with five loaves and two fish.

## **April 6**

Zoom services offer an unexpected intimacy. Yesterday, during our third online Sunday gathering of this crisis, I glanced across the *Brady Bunch* grid on my laptop screen, all the boxes containing faces of members of my congregation, all of them

much closer to me than when I stand behind a pulpit and look beyond the (usually) empty first row—that buffer between them and me—to see my people at a distance. Now we're miles apart but our screens place us a few feet from each other—our faces, our voices, our kitchen tables, our couches, our porches. A Zoom service pulls us into multiple domestic sites all at once.

Twelve people took a turn leading an aspect of our service, and another dozen offered prayer requests during our time to share joys and concerns. Each household became a host in our collective posture of hospitality to one another and to God. Coffee tables became altars.

Of course we still hide, even with these scenes from our ordinary lives on display. As with social media, the images we present of ourselves are designed for the other's gaze. The ordinary becomes a performance for the camera. We glance at the one little box with our own face inside of it to make sure we are presenting our best self. And we watch others as they watch this image of us, an abstraction. The technology does not allow for the vulnerable reciprocity of eye contact, to behold the fleeting moment when you are beholden—the flicker of mutual knowing. On Zoom, we are onlookers, voyeurs of virtual social relations.

Sundays on Zoom aren't quite church. These are symbolic gestures of community, a simulacrum of communion. At best, these are our digital prayers for the restoration of worship in the flesh.

### ***April 13***

This is Eastertide, a season to celebrate resurrection—that a tomb would not keep Jesus from returning to his disciples and to us. I do not know how to proclaim Christ's victory over death during this pandemic. Municipal workers in New York City are digging mass graves on Hart Island. Two million people have been infected worldwide. God knows how many will die this year.

Every death matters because every life is beloved. Every breath is a gift from the Spirit, every human being a testimony to God's love for the world. This Easter we are like Thomas, looking for flesh-and-blood evidence that death has not had the last word. Like Thomas we shall know Christ by his wounds. We'll know the communion of his body in the dying life, in the person gasping for one more breath. "I was sick and you took care of me," he once prophesied.

Easter reveals the depths of God's love for us, for our lives, for this world. The resurrected Jesus is a summons to love who God loves, to declare our solidarity to our neighbors, to the sick, to the caregivers, to workers who risk their health to sustain our lives.

## **April 20**

Today begins week six of ministry while in quarantine. For a couple hours each day I've been calling my way through our church directory. Another month of this and I might get to everyone.

I've made sure to reach out to the health-care workers more frequently. So far they are staying healthy, despite hospitals not having enough protective equipment. However, everyone is nervous about this week, when the cases for our region are projected to peak. "Great Physician," I pray words from our hymnal, "your hands rested on bodies in crisis. . . . We call on you today, O God, because we need your healing."

The crisis has spread to church members' bank accounts. I listened to their stories of the unemployment process, with government websites crashing throughout the day, a system unprepared for a flood of millions out of work at the same time. I reminded them of our congregation's mutual aid fund, the money we pool together every year to redistribute to those of us who suffer financial hardships.

The roots of this budget line dig into our commitments to the Anabaptist communities of the 16th century, congregations that followed the guidance of the early chapters of Acts, in which the Spirit of Pentecost inspires believers to "sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." A slogan of the Radical Reformation echoed through Anabaptist communities: *Omnia sunt communia*, "all things in common" (Acts 2:44). As inheritors of this tradition, our Mennonite congregation has been quietly helping with bills and debts, with personal financial crises of all kinds, both for people within and beyond our church, as any have need.

Our deacons sent out an email last week with a reminder that our mutual aid fund is available for anyone dealing with job loss. A few days after the email, our treasurer told me that several people responded by adding more to the common purse.

## **April 27**

Our finance committee has begun revising our budget for the upcoming fiscal year. On March 1, before this crisis, we hired a part-time staff person for our children and youth. I had been the only staff person for the past 14 years.

We're a small congregation, 70 people on a Sunday. In their first statement of faith, the *Schleitheim Confession*, the Anabaptists of the 16th century called themselves "a little flock of God." I've always found comfort in those words. Such an endearing description of a people without imperial dreams, a Christian tradition without world-historical fantasies.

We don't have an endowment. We don't even have a building. We're a renter church, moving from place to place, dependent on the hospitality of others and an affordable lease. The people of my congregation are vulnerable to the whims of this economy. A global recession overshadows our church finances. I wonder if we're headed back to the early years, when I divided my days between church work and a construction crew. I know how to be scrappy. Anabaptists do "More-with-less," as Doris Janzen Longacre titled the 1970s cookbook she assembled from Mennonite humanitarian workers around the world.

I hope our little flock survives. I know some congregations won't. God hasn't promised cash infusions to keep us solvent. A bank account is not a mighty fortress, a bulwark never failing. Holy institutions may crumble. The church is nonessential to God's redemption of the world. We do not bear the weight of salvation; we are not the world's last chance for liberation from the powers of sin.

Instead, we live by grace, organize by grace, build our structures as grace. The church is not an asset but a gift of the Spirit. We may fail to keep our organizations funded, but that doesn't mean the demise of God's plan. Our faith has to do with the cross, with defeat and humiliation—and with the birth of something unspeakably, unimaginably new: resurrection. The Christian movement is a miracle of grace.

#### **May 4**

On Friday I taped signs to my car—"Free our people," "Free our neighbors"—and pulled into the lineup of vehicles for our rolling protest at the county jail downtown. We drove around and around the block, honking our horns, calling out to the window slits high above us, "We see you! We love you!" I could see shadows of figures waving to us.

For weeks now we've been demanding the release of as many people as possible, to save them from the infection that will no doubt spread through the facility. Incarceration makes social distancing impossible. Our neighbors in detention are defenseless against the virus being brought in by infected staff. A correctional officer died last week from COVID-19. Four prisoners have tested positive so far. At the northern tip of our county there's a federal prison complex where more than 200 people have tested positive and six prisoners have died.

This week William Walker Minto was the casualty. A 73-year-old man with an underlying health condition, he had served six months of a 20-year sentence for the distribution of marijuana. His conviction for a nonviolent offense resulted in a death sentence. Last week the Associated Press reported that, of the federal prisoners tested for the coronavirus, 70 percent of them have it.

During our Sunday service on Zoom, a participant offered what we've come to call "Cameron's prayer." Cameron was a longtime member of our church who, in his later years, would repeat the same request every Sunday. He'd pray for people without homes, people in hospitals and prisons, and anyone stuck where they didn't want to be (see "[At the deathbed of a man who cared for others](#)," February 1, 2017). His prayer is my guide as this pandemic ravages the world. His words turn me to the well-being of workers forced to risk exposure, migrants locked in cages without sanitation supplies, prisoners subjected to infection, survivors of abuse quarantined with their abusers—for everyone rendered vulnerable and desolate because of this crisis.

With Cameron, with my church, with you, I pray that God will not forsake the forgotten.

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