

UPG Implications For Missions In A Covid Crisis

Originally posted to the World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission website, July 23, 2020.

In this article we remember that large populations of the world remain without a gospel witness and, therefore, the eternal hope that only Jesus can provide. Fledgling churches and missions movements amongst or near people with least access to the gospel have a great opportunity to witness to the reality of the shalom Kingdom of God through practical love and care, while testifying to the hope that they have in Christ. The global pandemic has given us all pause for thought, like a 'half time break' in a sports game. Let us use this time wisely to listen, learn and act to encourage others to engage in God's mission to reconcile all things under Christ.

As a Brazilian, I love soccer! Since moving to the USA sixteen years ago, I have learned a lot about (American) football. Now when Fall / Autumn comes in the USA, I love the cooler weather and college football! Whether in soccer or football, half-time breaks prove essential for the team to rest, reset, and regroup for the next half.

Introduction: A 'Half Time' Break

Many of us see COVID-19 as a disrupter, and rightly so. However, I would like to change this view of COVID-19 for this article. Instead of focusing on the negative affects of COVID-19, let's focus on the opportunities given to us because of COVID-19. Let's see COVID-19 as a much needed 'half-time break' for the global Church.

Much progress of spreading the Gospel has been made. There are now emerging movements in some parts of the world that, one or two decades ago, were considered some of the hardest places for gospel proclamation. For instance, in 2008, just twelve years ago, the country of Uzbekistan was expelling most foreign Christian workers. Today, I know of at least two significant indigenous Uzbek church planting networks that are not only starting hundreds of house-churches in Uzbekistan, but also deploying local Uzbek workers to reach the Karakalpaks, Uighur and even their own Uzbek diaspora in Russia.

As a global community, we know that the game is not over yet! There is a lot more to be done to see the Kingdom of God established among peoples and places that have never heard about Jesus Christ. But, during this 'half-time,' global leaders could function like sports team coaches. We can use the opportunity this crisis presents to pause and analyze what is working and what is not. We can take this opportunity to access more players from around the globe. The current roster could grow bigger and more diverse.

So, here is the current game scenario... We have made great progress. We have more and diverse players. We know that it is almost impossible to do pioneering work while social distancing. We need to take this time to adjust our game plan. We have the opportunity, temporarily, to focus inwardly instead of outwardly when it comes to reaching the remaining 7,402 ethnolinguistic people groups¹ who still have little or no access to the gospel.

While waiting for a resolution to COVID-19 or, in other words, until the half-time break is over, here are three main areas that global leaders serving among unreached people groups could take advantage of while serving.

1. Mature New Believers

Scripture provides clear direction for Christ's followers to help others move up the stairs of spiritual maturity. After taking the first step, evangelization, we have the mandate to move a person from an outsider to a genuine follower of Christ. Paul writes to the church in Colossae that the same way they "received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving" (Colossians 2:6-7). The pandemic is providing a great opportunity for local indigenous churches among unreached people groups to strengthen their faith in Christ.

A local leader in Central Asia took a great risk that is already paying off. As COVID19 forced a government



Ken Katayama volunteers as a Deputy Leader of the Mission Commission while serving as President of Crossover Global, a church planting organization committed to honouring God by providing gospel access to unreached people groups. Ken was born in Brazil and began working for Crossover in 1999. Ken became the second Executive Director for the USA Base of Crossover Global in 2011. He has a B.A. from Columbia International University and will complete an M.A. in Muslim Studies in December 2020. He served as a Vice-Chair of the board for COMHINA (The USA arm of COMIBAM) and until September 2019, Ken was Chair of the board for Missio Nexus (the USA missions alliance).

lockdown of his country, he quickly realized that he needed to think creatively to continue establishing new believers from a Muslim background in their faith-relationship with Jesus. For security reasons, and for the first time in his ministry, he recorded a series of messages in his local language and sent the audio message to his network of church planters. They then sent it on to the members of their house churches. After a couple of days many of these church planters asked if they could send the messages to their family members outside of Central Asia. Not only have these messages strengthened the local believers but they have also reached a whole new network of relationships that prior to COVID-19 was not part of their ministry strategy.

2. Equip Local Leaders

Scripture shows us that the stairs of spiritual maturity move committed followers toward becoming effective workers. Paul writes to the church in Ephesus that leaders should use their gifts to equip the saints so that they, the saints, can do the ministry of building up the body of Christ.

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.
(Ephesians 4:11-12)

Global leaders have a responsibility to equip saints for ministry. Here is where we multiply our impact. Here is where we can develop a lasting legacy among unreached peoples that will remain for generations to come.

In the Caucasus region, the leadership of a local church planting network took a bold step to conduct phone 'interviews', seeking potential leaders to be equipped online. It has been a couple of months now and the response has been great. COVID-19 provided these local believers with the time to focus on growing more in their Biblical knowledge as well as practical skills to lead a house-church. In time (hopefully soon), they will be able to put into practice what they have been taught.

3. Prepare Sent Ones

The next step in the stairs of spiritual maturity is to move effective workers toward becoming Great Commission leaders. These are believers who have taken personal responsibility to serve towards the fulfilment of Jesus' global mandate recorded in Matthew 28:18-20. They mobilize their local church members as goers or senders to reach the hundreds of millions of people without access to the gospel.

The Apostle Paul challenged the churches in Rome to pray and support his ambition "to preach the gospel, not

where Christ has already been named" (Romans 15:20) by questioning them:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? (Romans 10:14-15)

Paul was the goer asking the churches in Rome to be the sender. Likewise, as global leaders we have the opportunity to encourage local leaders with a global vision and prepare those who are willing to go. When this 'half-time break' is over, we hope more workers will be ready to be sent into the Lord's harvest fields.

As a church planting organization, Crossover Global gives high focus on preparing local leaders to become church planters. Our training practice has been to gather church planter candidates four times a year and have our local coordinators visit each candidate once a month for one-on-one training. During this time of global pandemic, our ministry practice had to change, but our focus on equipping church planters has not. From the northern regions of India to the islands of Indonesia to the mountains of North Africa, our teams have been conducting online classes for selected local leaders who, by God's grace, will become church planters ready to be sent when their local regions open up again.

Plus: Maximise Digital Reach

Finally, COVID-19 has catalyzed a significant new digitalization process in the way we work. Former practices of face-to-face gatherings, that seemed quite appropriate pre-COVID-19, will most likely be replaced with the virtual world where possible. For instance, global gatherings, organizational meetings, and strategic planning will be conducted with online virtual meetings, trainings, and team building. While we will no doubt lose something by doing it this way, it allows for much wider engagement from around the world.

After accounting for the security risks in restricted-access areas, we must take advantage of technological developments that are available. I see a great opportunity to reorganize global personnel in a virtual way instead of teams being restricted by geography. Remember, we now have bigger and more diverse teams! They may not look like you, speak your language, and think culturally differently, but they may be exactly the type of players you need when 'half-time' is over. My dear friend Warren Janzen, International Director of SEND International, just released a new book on virtual teams called *TECHnically Connected*, which provides great insights to leading virtual teams².

Unstoppable

I see the near future optimistically and I am praying for successful scientific developments to resolve the corona virus problem. But whatever happens, I firmly believe in Jesus' promise that He will build His Church and nothing, not even COVID-19, will stop it.

One thing is certain. Declaring God's glory among all peoples will require the mobilization of large numbers of believers firmly established in their walk with Christ and effectively equipped for their work as His co-labourers. The ways and methods in which the multiplication of our ministries will take place may look different but, by wisely selecting, properly training, and strategically launching workers, the Church will see the gospel made known to all peoples of the world.

In this regard, COVID-19 might be just the 'half-time break' you need! How are you taking advantage of your 'half-time'?

Footnotes:

1. Remaining ethnolinguistic people groups without a gospel witness can be tracked here:
https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/statistics
2. https://www.amazon.com/TECHnically-Connected-Navigating-Distance-Virtual-ebook/dp/B088KVCVF5/ref=tmm_kin_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=