

Gospel Preaching in a Time of Global Pandemic

A Brazilian Baptist Perspective

João Reinaldo Purin Jr

Wendal Mark Johnson

COVID-19 Struggles, Solutions, and the New Normal

In this collaborative article, the authors intend to reflect on the calamitous effects of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of Brazilian Baptists. The pandemic wrought devastation across the entire country of Brazil, resulting in many being left with deep scars in heart and mind that only Jesus' gospel can restore and heal. But, it also provided an opportunity for Brazilian Baptists to minister to those facing great need and suffering and embrace new technologies as a part of the new reality of local church ministry.

Struggles

Over the past two years, social distancing was enforced everywhere in Brazil, from outdoor spaces to indoor venues. Schools, businesses, and churches

were forced to close. As a result, nearly all worship services were transferred to an online format of some sort. These changes in local church practice occurred amid many deaths, rampant fear, and endemic hopelessness.

As a local church pastor ministering in an urban center, I (Purin) experienced first-hand the challenges COVID-19 brought to Christian mission in Brazil. Overnight, in-person services were suspended, churches were closed, and church members were encouraged to stay at home. A whole nation struggled to quickly adapt to what was called, “the new normal.” As people tried to adjust, the stress was evident in local church ministries, where guidance, comfort, and encouragement were lacking for many.

As a result of this pandemic-created social turbulence, Brazilian Baptist pastors found it necessary to analyze this new ministry context in which they found themselves. The question arose, “How can biblical proclamation and ministry be relevant and faithful amid a global health crisis?” Many found it necessary to revisit the annals of history and study how ministry was done in past times of crisis. Lessons learned from the past helped strengthen the biblical foundations for effective proclamation and ministry in a time of world crisis.

I was freshly reminded that suffering and death have been human constants since humanity’s fall in Eden. From the Brazilian perspective, things like war normally have only been observed from afar. The coronavirus pandemic was different. While it was global in extent and impact, this crisis was in our own homes and neighborhoods as well. Few families were unaffected by sickness, death, and economic difficulties. In the twenty-first century, without warning, humanity encountered a virus that in some ways reminded us of the biblical plagues of Exodus.

The pandemic’s deadly impact spread a sense of worldwide dread. Fear, despair, and disruption of routine led some to search for answers to life’s most difficult questions as the pandemic raged. For many, this led to a deepened desire to participate in a worship service, to discover new ways

to worship, or even to experience online worship for the first time. People were searching even if they did not have the freedom to leave their homes.

Finding solutions

While personal contact diminished, many local churches discovered that they could expand evangelistic outreach beyond the confines of their local church and community using technology. The use of new internet technologies directly impacted Brazilian Baptist pulpits and ministries. Ministry channels, live broadcasts, online services, small groups meeting via Zoom, WhatsApp prayer groups, all made for a powerful new set of tools used in gospel proclamation. As a result of these technological advances, local church preaching ministries were brought directly into the living rooms, smartphones, tablets, and computer screens of a veritable multitude of people, many who had little or no previous local church contact.

As the pandemic's destruction finally lessened, Brazilian Baptists realized the urgent need for churches to return to weekly in-person gatherings and to proactively reengage in God's mission in their local communities. Brazilian Baptists remain convinced that the gathered church is the place where Christian relationships are to be nurtured and biblical instruction concerning God's global mission is to be given. As church members return to their normal lives, local churches can once again reengage in God's global mission of sharing God's love in word and deed. That which was not anticipated was that many of these new technologies would become a permanent component in continuing the local church's mission and ministry.

The new normal

Despite these dire circumstances, many Brazilian Baptist churches experienced unprecedented ministry opportunity in the worst days of the pandemic. Notwithstanding difficulties, through biblical proclamation and

ministry, many churches remained alive, engaged, and relevant in their COVID-19 impacted cities.

Amid restrictions and uncertainties, Brazilian Baptists recognized a unique opportunity to bring answers to those asking life's deepest questions. Pastors and leaders took advantage of this God-given opportunity for mission advance. While being in a time of missional advance, these same leaders discovered their churches being tested to the limit. How could the local church community be preserved when it was not permitted to meet regularly? How could local churches minister to a generation impacted by personal hopelessness and deep loneliness?

Before the pandemic, churches had known only one way to live in community: by weekly gathering in face-to-face worship. For many, the experience of the communion of saints was synonymous with "going to the church." Local church life revolved around the church's physical structure and activities connected with it.¹ Even churches meeting in non-traditional locations like hotels or schools were identified by that physical location.²

Neriel Lopes in his work, *Post-pandemic Christianity*, highlighted the new church reality that had developed, a rapid shift from face-to-face worship to online worship.³ This new reality required local churches to make additional investments in technological resources and rapidly learn how to do online worship without losing sight of true biblical community. Rodrigo Motta describes this situation saying pastors were "challenged to reinvent ... liturgy and, [are] being challenged to [keep] connected as the body of Christ by using a 'recent new development' that human intelligence was able to create, the digital world."⁴

¹ Thom S. Rainer, *The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges and Opportunities That Will Determine the Future of Your Congregation* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 2020), 20.

² Jorge H. Barro, *O Pastor Urbano* (Londrina: Descoberta, 2003).

³ Neriel Lopes, *Cristianismo Pós-pandemia: Impacto e Oportunidades* (São Paulo: Editora Vida, 2020), 8.

⁴ Rodrigo Motta, *Não Existe Igreja On-line* (São Paulo: Editora Quitanda, 2020), 10.

In Brazil, online worship arose in response to these challenges. The goal was nothing less than the local church's preservation as a vital community and the advancement of God's mission. During Brazil's extended quarantine, people could easily and regularly view broadcasts of various church worship services. Transmitting worship services has become common among Brazilian Baptist churches. Worship services are held in various formats; they are transmitted digitally, resulting in services being viewed across the nation.

For many, this was a major paradigm shift. A new appreciation developed for how technology could be used as an instrument to disseminate gospel truth. Access to faithful gospel preaching, prayer and fellowship is now available anywhere, at any time. Churches learned that God's Word proclaimed could pass from a pulpit to a digital screen, where it would have 24-hour availability. What at first appeared to be a hindrance to God's mission proved to be an unprecedented opportunity for mission advance. By means of technological advances, fruitful ministries of gospel sowing and discipleship were accomplished by local churches.

Looking to the future – continuing the mission

Today, after two years of pandemic-induced suffering, many people still feel the aftereffects of exhaustion, fear, and uncertainty. Yet, the majority recognize that it is time to return to weekly in-person worship services. Now, the challenge for some, being so accustomed to the digital church experience, is that they feel they no longer need to participate in person in local church worship. This in no way reflects the Biblical pattern.

Baptists recognize the New Testament priority that regular worship must take place by the physical gathering of local believers. Hebrews 10:24-25 clearly states: "Let us hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us be concerned about one another in order to promote love and good works, not staying away from our worship meetings, as some habitually do, but encouraging each other, and all the

more as you see the day drawing near.” Gospel transformation creates life in communion with God and with the others.

For Brazilian Baptists, there is much work to be done. Beyond churches simply reopening their doors, it is time again for churches to aggressively reengage the Great Commission at home and abroad. After the hardships experienced by so many, a renewed sense of interdependence and New Testament community must prevail again in the churches.

What have Brazilian Baptists learned about ministry in a time of global health crisis? Angela Duckworth stated at the pandemic’s beginning: “If you are not learning something in this crisis, you are not paying attention.”⁵ Practically, local churches must reflect on their recent experience and ask, “What have we learned to better fulfill the Great Commission?”

Brazilian Baptist churches are learning to reaffirm their commitment to God’s mission to proclaim His redemptive message to all peoples in all places. Brazilian Baptists are once again returning to their places of worship, so that they might in turn prepare to go once again to the nations. Weekly, local churches celebrate and proclaim God’s work of redemption.

During the height of the pandemic, I (W. Mark) met regularly online with numerous Brazilian pastors and Brazilian home missionaries for a time of prayer and encouragement. Many of these servants also felt the pain of personal loss while simultaneously ministering to others suffering loss. One pastor recounted losing 13 family members and being unable to personally attend a single funeral or burial. As pastors commented on their shared experience of national trauma, we noted that for many people, this was just one more trauma among many that they regularly experienced (health challenges, job loss, violence, addiction, family breakdown, just to name a few). Only Jesus’ gospel can restore and heal the brokenhearted.

⁵ Angela Duckworth, “How to Find your Grit in a Crisis” (video, Harvard Business Review), accessed April 27, 2022, <https://hbr.org/video/6154372402001/find-your-grit-in-a-crisis>.

This changed the way I engaged people in gospel conversations. Questions such as, “What happened? How did you feel about that?” and “What was the worst part of this experience?” opened doors for many gospel conversations which focused on Jesus as the ultimate solution for trauma healing. This became evident not only as it related to COVID-19 losses, but also in ministering to anyone who has experienced any form of trauma. The pandemic opened my eyes to the fact that all of us are surrounded by people who deal with some level of trauma on a regular basis. Learning how to talk to people about pandemic losses helped me to be a more sensitive listener and a more effective gospel communicator, tying their pain to the restoring hope of the gospel message. “He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds” (Psalm 147:3).

In engaging God’s mission, God’s people leave their local church and go to the nations to proclaim God’s gospel message of redemption. Local church life advances on two truths: a worshiping community and a mobilized membership on mission both locally and to the nations. Eugene Peterson defines the church as a resurrection community. He states, “the . . . Christian life is a community gathered in an impossible place, a tomb.”⁶ Christ’s empty tomb and his resurrection offer ultimate hope for us all. Trauma healing ministries can, therefore, be part of the local church’s ministry in their community in helping to bring hope and healing to the brokenhearted.

Brazilian Baptists are still dealing with and ministering under the impact of many COVID-19 related deaths. Mass graves and countless tombs across Brazil give testimony to lives lost during the pandemic. Many of those who survived have not fully grieved for the massive loss of life that occurred, including the loss of many Baptist pastors. The bitter taste of death and defeat has been tasted by many. It would be easy to give way to frustration and despair. Yet, it must always be remembered, it was in front of a tomb that the world received the most glorious news - “He is not here, but is risen”

⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 269.

(Luke 24:6). Brazilian Baptists are learning how biblical truth helps us to deal with grief and loss.

Local church worship and global mission mobilization complement and cooperate with each other for the purpose of advancing God's global glory among the nations in all circumstances, including a global pandemic. The weekly gathering of the local church is the place from which workers are mobilized to deploy in God's mission to the world. The pandemic has reminded Brazilian Baptists of the truth that it is necessary to prioritize regular local church worship for the advance of God's global mission.

To this end, the role of the pulpit assumes an ever-increasing importance: evangelizing those entering the local church, instructing and discipling those who are part of the local church, and mobilizing a new generation of church members to go to the nations. In all of this, discipleship is key. Every church member must take the gospel from the churches to the streets. Brazilian Baptists are learning to mesh traditional evangelism and missions commitments with the use of innovative new technologies in their delivery. The global pandemic introduced many technological innovations which were thought to be short term solutions to an immediate problem. Brazilian Baptists now realize that these new technologies have become a part not only of present ministry, but also of future local church ministry.

Throughout history, God's church has always faced difficult times such as persecutions, schisms, wars, and pandemics. This generation has experienced the COVID-19 pandemic. For many Brazilian Baptists, this has been an opportunity to observe, reflect, and learn more about the local church and its missional role in the world. May God help His people to remain alert and act upon the important lessons that have been learned until He comes again!

Purin Jr., 51 years old, has been a Baptist pastor for 28 years. Since 2007 he is the Senior Pastor at Méier Baptist Church, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He also serves at South of Brazil Baptist Theological Seminary (STBSB) where he teaches Christian Ministry. He received his MTS from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

W. Mark Johnson has served for 30 years as an IMB missionary in Brazil. Presently, he serves as the leader of the IMB's theological education team in Brazil. W. Mark serves as Professor of Missiology at the South Brazil Seminary in Rio de Janeiro. He received his MDiv, Th.M., and PhD all from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. W. Mark was Purin's master's thesis supervisor.