

Copyright (c) 2020 Baptist Press. Reprinted from Baptist Press (www.baptistpress.com), news service of the Southern Baptist Convention. The original story can be found at <http://www.bpnews.net/54515/namb-church-planting-missionaries-adjust-to-covid19-crisis>

NAMB church planting missionaries adjust to COVID-19 crisis

by Brandon Elrod, posted Monday, March 23, 2020 (one month ago)

ALPHARETTA, Ga. -- Eight months ago, Gregg Gober and his family arrived in New York City, ready to begin the process of launching a new church. Hope Community in Brooklyn had just started gaining momentum when the COVID-19 virus brought life in the city -- and the world -- to a halt.

"We had just moved the church out of our apartment," Gober said. "We started renting space in an old synagogue. Last Wednesday (March 11), we had more people than we've ever had, and this was a momentum killer for us."

Just like established churches across North America and the world, Southern Baptist church plants like Hope Community are having to quickly adapt to the new -- hopefully temporary -- challenges of church life in a world where group gatherings are impossible.

In addition, most recently launched churches also have the challenge of attempting to build up their new congregation, discover and develop leaders and establish a solid financial base. Many are responding by finding ways to serve their community and creatively keep their congregations connected.

Gober felt God had orchestrated their steps in starting the new church. His and his wife's hearts were moved toward the need in New York City while Gober was a youth pastor at their sending church, Cyprus Baptist Church in Benton, La.

Now, Gober, his family and the core group who moved from Benton are trusting that God still has a plan as they continue reaching out to their neighbors in Brooklyn.

"We're making the best of it. We've sent out fliers into the community to let them know we can go grocery shopping if they need it," Gober said. "We reached out to schools in our community. We provided doughnuts and coffee for one group of teachers who had to go in to prepare" for the school's transition to distance learning.



Gregg Gober, lead church planting missionary of Hope Community, had only been in Brooklyn for eight months when the COVID-19 crisis forced his church to move to online meetings. They had only recently transitioned from meeting in their apartment to renting a space for weekly gatherings. From right to left: Gober, his wife Tamra, their son Eli and their daughter Ellie.

Photo from Gregg Gober's Facebook page



Ryan Sidhom, lead church-planting missionary of River City Church in Vancouver, Wash., along with his wife Clarissa, their sons Banner (right) and Anchor (left). Sidhom has sought to leverage the restrictions resulting from COVID-19 crisis as a springboard for launching and emphasizing small groups at his church.

Photo by Sarah Costa Photography.

Before the crisis, Hope Community had started to gain a presence in their community by conducting "random acts of kindness," such as handing out donuts and coffee in the subway. A few people they had met started attending their Wednesday night Bible study, and one family had planned on attending for the first time the week that gatherings in the city were banned.

These and similar challenges are leading the North American Mission Board's (NAMB) Send Network team, NAMB's church planting ministry, to conduct weekly videoconference gatherings with the church planting missionaries.

NAMB president Kevin Ezell announced last week that he is putting a hold on all discretionary spending so NAMB can focus on keeping church plants and missionaries on the field during this critical time when people need the hope of the Gospel.

"There is always a huge camaraderie between the pastors here, especially within the Send Network family. There are always texts and emails going back and forth," Gober said. "One pastor friend who is bivocational lost his job because of this. So, we reached out to him and asked what we can do for his family."

In the Portland, Ore., metro area, Ryan Sidhom, a church planting missionary who launched River City Church in Vancouver, Wash., has seen the COVID-19 restrictions -- those against large gatherings and those that limited their ability to volunteer in their community -- as an opportunity to jumpstart the church's small group ministry.

"We've been praying for how to bolster our small groups," Sidhom said. "What I need to put my focus on is equipping the people of our church to minister to each other."

These groups will conduct themselves virtually, Sidhom said, and he believes this will provide an excellent avenue for his church to begin the process of multiplication by raising up local leaders.

After unveiling the plan, the church had five small groups. The vision is for the groups to branch off and start new groups as they approach the limit of 10 people -- the maximum number of people for gatherings recommended by the government.

Sidhom bases the approach off of the way the persecuted church around the world manages its gatherings, keeping the number of their groups small.

"I was having a conversation with one of my mentors," Sidhom said, "and our conversation turned toward East Asia where we had done some work. They have to keep their groups small out of fear for persecution."

One aim of the small group approach is to inspire his people to cultivate a heart for the nations.

"When everything is safe and we can gather again, I don't ever want to pull the plug on our less-than-10 gatherings. I want them to continue to grow and continue to multiply," said Sidhom.

Group leaders will receive a discussion guide that helps them walk participants through questions about their spiritual lives as well as through the messages Sidhom will conduct through Facebook Live.

Two Chinese church planting missionaries in the San Francisco Bay Area have seen the transition to online services as a unique opportunity for outreach.

One said he immediately noticed his online services making a global impact as people started tuning in from outside the United States.

Another, Anders Chun, lead church planting missionary for the Tracy, Calif., campus of Crosspoint Chinese Church, began using Zoom as the platform for hosting his church's meetings. As they grow more comfortable with the software, they will start inviting others in their community to join them for the online worship experience and other virtual events.

On their first Sunday (March 15), the church saw a pair of first-time guests virtually attend their service.

"They never came to our worship physically, but they came the first time online," Chun said. "When we do the virtual meetup as a church, there are some people in Tracy who are not believers yet. So, it's a good opportunity for them to check out our church."

Eventually, he plans to start hosting online outreach events, inviting celebrities from Hong Kong, whom their church has connections with, for online interviews. That, Chun said, has potential to resonate with his Mandarin- and Cantonese-speaking audience.

"I think this can be positive," Chun said. "Like I said to other church planters, when we plant a church, we try our best to try and promote and outreach. All of a sudden, we are forced to try something new."



Anders Chun, his wife Zan and their daughter Aza. Chun is a church planting missionary who leads the Tracy, Calif., campus of Crosspoint Chinese Church. Chun has seen the transition to online meetings as a new way to reach out to those in his community who may have never physically set foot into the church building.

Photo from Crosspoint Church's Facebook page.