

Evangelists face career upheaval in the midst of COVID-19

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NASHVILLE (BP) -- This time a year ago, Tom Tucker, a revivalist and evangelist based out of Rock Hill, S.C., had speaking engagements booked on all but one Sunday. This spring, Tucker's calendar is empty -- all of his plans for the next two months have been suddenly canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Bill Britt teaches in Kenya, through his organization, Compel Outreach International. Submitted photo

For Tucker and others who make their full-time living on the road, preaching the Gospel at various events, conferences and churches, the nationwide shutdown of gatherings is especially financially detrimental.

Just two weeks ago, Tucker was driving home after speaking at multiple church services. His entire spring schedule was filled. But it only took hours for the cancellations to begin rolling in as the government issued guidelines for social distancing and restrictions on gatherings.

"I knew then that pastors would be calling me, and they did," Tucker said, "and everything was canceled."

Bill Britt, president of Compel Outreach International in Haughton, La., echoed Tucker's sentiment.

"Just a few weeks ago, no one would have remotely understood what was about to happen around the world," Britt said.

Britt, whose organization has had events canceled all across the U.S. and other countries, said evangelists find themselves in a period of waiting. No one knows when travel -- and beyond that, speaking engagements -- will resume.

Gary Bowlin, president of the Louisiana Conference of Southern Baptist Evangelists, said COVID-19 came at the worst time for evangelists.

"Our revivals and events have been canceled during one of our busiest times of the year," Bowlin said.

"We're all in a holding pattern," Tucker added.

Tucker began his ministry as a full-time evangelist only a year ago. He said it took a lot of trust to surrender his life to that call. But as the effects of COVID-19 came to fruition, Tucker found himself asking God what was happening.

"When all this stuff started happening, I said 'Lord what are you doing? This is what you called us to do,'" Tucker said.

The nationwide shutdown not only eliminates the evangelist's travel and ministry, but his income. Bowlin noted that many evangelists rely on love offerings and don't have guaranteed salaries. Britt said the cancellation of spring events could mean the loss of the majority of an evangelist's income.

"As long as churches are not meeting, then the evangelists are receiving no love offerings from these churches," Britt said. "The evangelist receives the bulk or all of his income through these events where he is scheduled to minister. Even if the shutdown lasts another six to eight weeks, that will mean no income for the evangelist for months. This could be devastating for many ministries across the country."

Some churches are still sending love offerings to evangelists, Tucker said, adding that he is glad many churches have already begun rescheduling events for the fall season. Tucker encouraged congregations to seek to care for those who rely on their financial support as best they can.

Britt also said churches and individuals should try reach out to evangelists and their families. But the change in direction for the moment brings a new opportunity for revival, Tucker noted.

"This is going to make the church do some different things," Tucker said. "I'm sensing there's a hunger, and it may be that God has just slowed us down to realize that we need Him, and we need Him desperately."

Tucker said he hopes that with a revival of the Gospel, and individuals turning to God, the need for evangelists will become greater than ever.

"I'm praying that it's [COVID-19] going to escalate [revivals] to where all of us are busier than we've ever been when this is over with," Tucker said.

The message for the church now, Tucker said, is revival, and out of revival comes evangelism.

Amid physical and economic concerns prompted by the pandemic, Bowlin said many people might be more receptive to the Gospel.

"It is possible that we could see the beginning of another spiritual awakening in America," Bowlin said.

And Bowlin noted that the sudden emptiness of evangelists' calendars hasn't caught God by surprise.

"I find great comfort in that, knowing He is in control," Bowlin emphasized. "Obviously, we have never faced anything like this. It has been a time of great peace for me knowing that God has a reason for allowing this and great good will come from it."

Bowlin and many other evangelists are using other means such as YouTube and Facebook to still minister to people.

"God will direct us, and we have a burning desire in our hearts to tell people that Jesus saves," Bowlin said. "We hope and pray we can be back in churches soon, but we know God is in control, and we will follow Him."

Britt said he utilizes social media to host virtual services and has tried to post things that align with his calling while he is unable to travel.

"All of us want to stay busy sharing the Gospel and exercising our gifts and calling even during this time," Britt said.

Sammy Tippit, president of the Conference of Southern Baptist Evangelists, said evangelists need to be preparing to move to forms of digital outreach, adding that the pandemic hasn't so much begun the move as accelerated what was already happening.

Tippit said he hopes that when the restrictions of the pandemic are lifted, evangelists will be able to act on new ideas and strategies. Importantly, he said that might also apply to new ways to earn income -- perhaps including raising support or finding positions on church staffs.

But as changes unfold and ministry platforms adjust to the current needs of the global body of Christ, evangelists are capitalizing on the time and temporarily limited geographic space they have been given to live on mission for the Gospel.

Tucker said he just wants to seek what God is doing in this situation, staying faithful to his calling and trusting the Lord.

"We're sitting here waiting, but it doesn't mean we're not doing anything," Tucker said.

Tucker recounted a recent experience waiting in line at a grocery store. He stood behind a woman with a cart full of toilet paper as she complained and expressed frustration. Tucker took the opportunity to start a conversation and share the Gospel, and ended up leading the woman to Christ.

That experience, Tucker said, reminded him again of the purpose the Lord has given believers.

"Let's not be so selfish about what's going on in our lives," Tucker said, "because there's others that need Jesus."

Tess Schoonhoven is a Baptist Press staff writer.