

Creative Thinking for Crisis Times

By Senior Bishop Lawrence Reddick

Dear CME Family,

In response to coronavirus challenges, the President and the CDC are asking people to not assemble in groups larger than 10. Many of us, in response, are working diligently to ramp up our streaming services, but also, many of us are simply cancelling services. My question to you is: how creative are you willing to be?

In a church room in Alabama in 1987, two pastors – one white, one black – sat with leaders of their respective congregations, trying to negotiate a purchase. A contract was before them that had been negotiated by the white pastor and the previous black pastor. I was the new black pastor, having succeeded a leader who had died, and I was fighting for the interpretation of the contract which had been passed to the congregation by the previous pastor. The room was tense with racial and testosterone undertones; there were about 5 leaders from both congregations, and a white attorney hired by our side. Two names should be called: S. William Harris, our chair of the trustee board, and G. William Noble, our white attorney (and now judge).

At an uptight moment, the white pastor, using the tactic of “divide to conquer,” turned his attention away from me and said to the trustee chair, “Mr. Harris, do you agree with Rev. Reddick?” Mr. Harris, about 75-80 years old, answered like only a very wise old black man would answer: “I agree with Mr. Noble.” I couldn’t believe it! You almost have to be a pre-1970 Southerner to really appreciate his tactic, for he pivoted the effort to divide two black men by spinning the disagreements into the arena of the two white men. Nothing else was said.

The heritage of African Americans as oppressed people who came to the U.S. not by “migration” but by “forced enslavement” is a heritage of people who learned to wisely, cunningly, subtly outthink the oppressor, and to speak in creative, nuanced, hidden ways.

Now is the time for creative thinking. It may not be as simple as saying, “We must close.” Why not? Because people need ministry in crisis. Meeting this coronavirus crisis, when we’ve been asked to congregate in groups of 10 or less, requires thinking that is more flexible than simply saying, “We must close.”

I applaud the congregations that are ramped up to provide worship services online, that are streamed for people across the country to see. But for those who are not capable of it, your creative thinking and prayers for new insights can come up with some new and fresh ideas.

If your church cannot stream services, have you considered services by conference call? Remember, if you try it, that worship does not have to be a structured prayer here, a song by the choir there, a “we have always done it this way” effort. Venture out! Make it something new! (But be sure and plan it!) Have someone ready with a CD that lifts praise! Have another person prepared to pray – not a long, lengthy, “in church” prayer (because people’s attention spans may be shorter when they cannot see), let the pastor read a short Scripture and give a short meditation or a one-point message. It may not match what you would have called “having church” 20 years ago, but it may well nourish your people at the point of their present needs, and what we may all experience from it is God stretching us in the process, enlarging the tents of our minds as to what worshipping God and nurturing God’s people really are.

As I arose this morning, I remembered a book – David Yonggi Cho’s SUCCESSFUL HOME CELL GROUPS.¹ Cho is pastor of the largest congregation in Seoul, South Korea (some consider it the largest in the world). When the church was growing phenomenally, he was challenged to find a way to take personal nurture to the entire membership. He empowered a group of leaders to, in turn, become leaders of cell groups meeting in homes. So, he nurtured the leaders who, in turn, nurtured the church. (Yes, it’s the old class leader system.) Pastor, have you considered meeting with 7-9 people on Saturday morning, ministering to them, and in turn giving them authority to minister on Sunday during regular worship time by way of telephone conference calls to a worship group of just a few? or to their own family gathered at home? as they follow through with the very nurturing you gave to them the day before? Be creative.

To quote the late Bishop Joseph C. Coles, Jr.: “Don’t let what you cannot do keep you from doing what you can!”

Pastors, Ministers, and Lay Leaders: I challenge you to pray for God to give you fresh insights that will keep your congregation nourished, spiritually blessed, and encouraged during this time of crisis. Do more than just close your church doors.

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¹David Yonggi Cho was born *Paul* Yonggi Cho in 1936.