



Pastor Chad Stuart of the Spencerville Church in Maryland, Pastor John Brunt of the Edmonds Church in Washington, and Pastor Jennifer Scott of the St. Petersburg Church in Florida share how ministry has changed during the pandemic.

Three Congregations

CREATING COMMUNITY WHILE APART

BY ALITA BYRD

This article was originally published on the Spectrum website on April 10, 2020.

Three pastors talk about what their churches are doing during this difficult time, and how in some ways their community feels even closer, and even more people are “attending” church than usual. Pastor Chad Stuart of the Spencerville Church in Maryland, Pastor John Brunt of the Edmonds Church in Washington, and Pastor Jennifer Scott of the St. Petersburg Church in Florida share their technology struggles and how they think the pandemic will change us permanently.

What do you see as the most important thing you

and your church should be doing during this time of the coronavirus pandemic, with social distancing, quarantine, isolation, sickness, worry, and even death?

Chad Stuart: I believe the most important thing doesn't change, which is to make disciples. The way we go about it changes and I think maybe even improves! It improves in that we are, by nature of the situation, thinking first of people's needs and through those means witnessing for Jesus.

John Brunt: Our most important need is to stay together and keep up some kind of communication. Even though we have to be physically distant, we need to stay together spiritually and emotionally. This is especially



Pastor Chad Stuart preaches to a largely empty sanctuary. The only people in attendance were those participating in the worship service.

important given how much anxiety many are having. We want to come through this even closer as a community. If the church isn't serving in a time of crisis like this it doesn't deserve credibility.

Jennifer Scott: My thinking has been that the most important thing to do is to create togetherness while apart.

Our last Sabbath in church together was really memorable and special.

On March 10, I received a call from Shellamae and Mike who had been waiting for the right Sabbath. It was Tuesday. "Pastor, how about this Sabbath for our baptism?"

"Absolutely!"

Something in my heart told me to invite another couple, Eddie and Lilly, as they were ready too, even though it was now Friday. It had been a crazy week. Just that morning, my daughter, Camryn, got the last ticket to Tampa from Valencia, Spain to arrive home at 11 p.m. Sunday, ending her sophomore year abroad early.

"Pastor we are on our way, with our bathing suits!"

"Okay, I'll have the robes!"

It was now Sabbath morning, March 14. The church was sparsely attended and we sat spread apart. I got

word that our sister churches nearby had closed, and several calls wondering if we were open. Eddie and Lilly, Shellamae and Mike were all on their way. It felt like the Spirit was orchestrating our Sabbath morning service.

It was a perfect way to have our last "in-church" service together. And in hindsight, it feels even more special. The very next week, I was on Zoom, linked to our YouTube channel, live with my laptop. The pews empty.

How has your congregation adapted to the new reality? What are you doing differently?

Chad Stuart: They have adapted quite well. Everything feels different and I have to admit, different for the better. Many churches the size of Spencerville [over 1,200 active members] are busy being busy. We have a committee for everything and the idea is always to program ourselves into an answer. Now all the events, programs, committees are on pause and yet we are discovering that a larger percentage of the body is activated for ministry. Go figure—we program less and reduce the burden on people's schedules and they are freed up to do hands-on ministry in their neighborhoods and for fellow church members.

John Brunt: We are obviously not meeting. We are not

even having small meetings. We are also not a very tech-savvy church (which is surprising since we have a bunch of engineers who design airplanes at Boeing). We have never live-streamed our services, for instance. So, we are using simple stuff, primarily our church Facebook page. Here is what we are doing:

Every night, Monday through Friday at 7:30 p.m., I do a livestream on our Facebook page for about 15–20 minutes. I ask the congregation to email me prayer requests throughout the day. I read these, read a Scripture verse and pray, and share some ideas for staying together. Members have been great at giving suggestions. For example, one artistic member sent in designs for kids to download and color.

I do a livestream, one-person, Sabbath School lesson study from my house at 10:00 a.m. every Sabbath morning.

I do a livestream, one-person, worship service with prayer requests, prayer, a children’s story, and sermon from my house at 11:00 a.m. on Sabbath morning. (These are on our Facebook page and are archived there, but after the fact they are also archived on our website.)

Our music leader puts together a playlist of six praise songs (the same number we usually do in our worship service) from YouTube for people to watch and hopefully sing along with after the sermon. It stays on the page all week so people can come back to it.

At 7:00 p.m. on Friday and Saturday evenings our church administrator, a recent Walla Walla graduate with a wonderful voice, has a livestream hymn sing from her home. It is seen live and then archived on the Facebook page. She sings alone and invites watchers to sing along with her. They can also give real-time requests for hymns. It has been quite popular.

Every Sabbath afternoon the seven elders and I divide up the church list and phone all the members. We wish them Happy Sabbath, ask how they are doing, and if there is anything they need. People seem quite appreciative.

We are doing committee meetings with Zoom.

Last autumn we had small groups for ten weeks. We had about seven groups with a total of fifty people participating. We had planned to start again the third week of March. We didn’t, but we now have four group leaders who are willing to do small groups via Zoom. Our plan had been to use my new book (*Enjoying Your Bible*).

The first group will start this week, the others the next week. We’ll see how many participate.

Jennifer Scott: We are creating a prayer board for those we know personally who are front-liners and most vulnerable.

We are continuing our mid-week online studies with prayer and encouraging Bible verses and are, step by step, expanding them to include more classes and more people. Our Zoom breakout room kicked everyone out not once but twice because I was learning “on the spot” how to set the timer correctly, even though I had practiced. Everyone was very patient.

We’ve gathered our deacons to redefine our job descriptions while being a “stay at home” church.

What are you and your church doing during the divine worship hour on Sabbath morning?

Chad Stuart: Spencerville is still streaming its services every Sabbath morning. We have been doing this for several years so that is not different. The differences are that we have shortened the service and it is much more produced. People are set in place, camera angles are set, etc. This makes it all roughly fifty minutes.

John Brunt: At first, we planned on having a small group at the church do a livestream with some music and about five participants. But then, since we are in the middle of one of the worst outbreaks (it is now beginning to subside a bit), we decided to be completely safe and just do the one-person children’s story and sermon from my home.

Jennifer Scott: The first Sabbath it was just me online for a sermon, figuring out technology—just my kids and me. Since then we’ve added a remote Zoom panel of members discussing Sabbath School, family moment videos, special music recordings, and Gulfcoast School updates.

Technology has been bumpy—much less than perfect. I tell myself it’s not about perfection but connection, even though last Sabbath I had an awful audio loop and the week before my videos were in slow motion while going live.

How many attendees/online watchers have you had?

Chad Stuart: We have definitely increased in our live viewership, but where we are seeing the largest increase is in the viewership beyond the live service—our on-demand viewership. I don’t really know all the specific numbers,

but I think we are getting 1,000–2,000 views on Facebook and then another 600–1,500 on YouTube and then we are also on Hope Channel and It Is Written TV and I don't even have a guess at the increase (if there is one) on those platforms.

John Brunt: Our usual church attendance on Sabbath morning has been about 140. I have no idea how Facebook counts viewers, but according to their count, we have had about 250 views for the worship services and about 100 for the evening church family updates. One of Sophia's hymn sings had over 400 views. I know that a couple dozen different people comment during the livestream.

Jennifer Scott: Our membership is about 260. We average 100 in attendance. Our online viewing is humble in number, but growing, maybe tripled from before the coronavirus. We are seeing chats from young adults and snowbirds who visited us and are now viewing out of state.

How has your church budget been affected during this crisis so far? What plans do you have to weather the storm financially?

Chad Stuart: We are blessed with a generous church so we went into this crisis from a really strong financial position and in the first month we didn't see a major decline—in fact, our tithe might have even grown a little, and best of all our member-assistance fund has grown wonderfully as we've made special appeals in preparation to help our members that will experience job loss and income cuts.

John Brunt: So far, so good. We had a very good month of online giving in March. We hope it will keep up. We have a video from the North American Division on the Facebook page explaining online giving.

Jennifer Scott: Florida Conference anticipated a possible 30% reduction in giving for the month of March, but it is still being determined. We are still clarifying our own congregation's totals for March; I think our totals will match the predictions. I do know that our people were generous as two members created a drive-by Quarterly

pick-up, where members also gave donations.

What things have your parishioners had to deal with so far?

Chad Stuart: Thus far we haven't had any cases of COVID-19 in our church. We do have some members that have had to go to the hospital for various other reasons and it is hard because we are not able to be there for them in those challenges due to the hospital visitation restrictions.

John Brunt: We have had at least three lose their jobs so far. No major catastrophes, but families are getting a bit stir-crazy staying inside.

Jennifer Scott: The deacon team and I are calling all of our members, looking to see how everyone is really doing now as we are following "safer at home" guidelines, which are not as strict in Florida yet. Some members have lost their clients, especially those in hospitality industries. I think everyone stands in between holding on to normal and a healthy dose of fearful expectation of what might be.

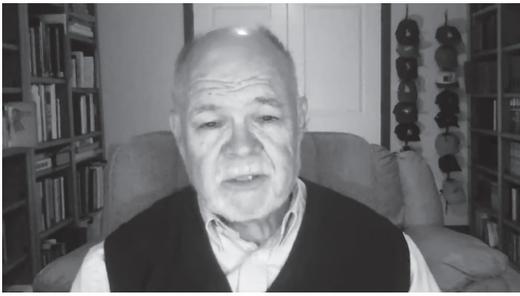
How have the subjects of your sermons changed in the last few weeks?

Chad Stuart: I definitely reference COVID-19 in my sermons but I am not dwelling on it week in and week out. Our desire is to give people hope in this time and so we stuck to the sermon series we had planned which is a sermon series on the words of Jesus from the cross. Hope is the greatest need and Adventists love to talk about hope, so I believe we have a very relevant message for these times.

John Brunt: They haven't really changed, since I'm doing a series leading up to Easter, on the cross and resurrection in Mark, which lends itself well to the current crisis.

Jennifer Scott: The pandemic is framing my sermons. It's framing all of the sermons I hear. As it should—it is a living illustration that is making us adjust and think. My first sermon topic focused on the Blood of the Lamb, over

We do have some members that have had to go to the hospital for various other reasons and it is hard because we are not able to be there for them in those challenges due to the hospital visitation restrictions.



Pastor John Brunt (far left) gives an "EAC Family Update" via Facebook on April 27. Pastor Jennifer Scott (left) preaches online via Zoom/YouTube on April 25.

the doors of our hearts, which is the Passover, for those who believe. Last Sabbath we took Communion together, remotely.

How do you think this pandemic will change the way that church happens for you and your congregation in the long run?

Chad Stuart: I'm seeing a congregation that is being much more intentional about engaging their fellow church members and the neighbors in their community. Every chance I get I am reminding all of us that we are to be physically distanced, but we must find ways to draw socially close to one another and those in our community in need—which is really all of us right now. My prayer is that we will come out of this season of isolation actually more connected. That seems like a contradiction, but I see it happening and the member outreach structure we have established with our elders and various other members was created with the idea that every member (active and inactive, in state and out of state) will be in contact with the church family throughout this process. That is more than we were doing entering into this trial.

I also believe we have the great opportunity to have better control of the calendar when this ends. We are discovering what we need and what we really don't. I also think this time of living in the digital world for ministry has pushed us to see the importance of having a much larger and more consistent footprint than we did previously. Whether we like it or not, a lot of folk are in the digital world and so we need to go and meet people where they are.

Finally, I hope this will help individuals to have a greater appreciation for the value of meeting face to face, week in and week out. Many members have said they didn't realize how much they would miss church. We often times don't value things until they are gone—maybe this time will recalibrate us on the importance of "not giving up the habit of meeting together."

John Brunt: The tech folks have already committed themselves to beginning regular livestreaming of our worship services once we are back in the sanctuary. I'm hoping that there may be a surge in attendance when we first start back because people have missed being together, but who knows? There are people forming new friendships as they commiserate with each other, and I'm sure that will continue.

Jennifer Scott: I think this whole experience will change things a lot going forward. Only by the Spirit will it be the things that really need to change.

I am enjoying my kids, not running to so many events, but missing the opportunity to hug everyone like I used to.

We are watching everyone get creative during this time, and being inspired by their ideas.

I am praying each day that we/I can grow closer to others, more honest with ourselves, and more connected with our Lord during this time that presses us. It seems that the Spirit of God always uses times like this for that purpose. With that said, we are also laughing about the toilet paper thing, while still making sure we have some. We are both worried and hopeful. We are concerned and positive. Together while apart.



ALITA BYRD is interviews editor for the *Spectrum* website, and has been writing for *Spectrum* since 1995. She holds a degree in English and journalism from Washington Adventist University and an MA in history from the London School of Economics. She recently moved with her husband and four children to Santiago, Chile, where they will live for the next several years.