

## A Special Note from Bill Cleveland, Sojourners Group Leader

Hello Sojourners Class!

I don't know about you, but I really miss being able to come together as Sojourners! Here is an article by Thomas Lambrecht that makes some good points on "**The Impact of Social Distancing**"

We have a new phrase in our vocabulary: "social distancing." In this time of the novel coronavirus, keeping a distance from other people can help stop the spread of the disease. It is ironic to me that this virus has caused an extreme form of what our society has already been doing. In 2000, sociologist Robert D. Putnam wrote the book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Based on over 500,000 interviews, Putnam demonstrated that "we sign fewer petitions, belong to fewer organizations that meet, know our neighbors less, meet with friends less frequently, and even socialize with our families less often."

Our society has become less socially engaged. I think the supreme example for me was watching a young couple eat dinner at a restaurant, each one buried in his or her own smart phone and not talking with each other. Even the things we do together, we no longer do "together." It has been said that, in order to communicate with a teenager, you do not talk to them or call them on their phone, you text them (or is it message them on Facebook, or contact through Instagram, or ...).

Now we are being forced into even greater "social distancing" from each other due to the coronavirus. Sporting events, school classes, and even church services are being cancelled across the country. We are no longer supposed to be in any gathering of ten or more people. And some parts of the country are telling their residents to "shelter in place" — that is, stay home except for essential errands.

Joni Mitchell captured what I am feeling with her 1969 song, "Big Yellow Taxi." The refrain contains the line, "Don't it always seem to go, that you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone?" We often don't appreciate something we have until we don't have it anymore.

I wonder if one way God might use the current crisis is to help us refocus on the value of human connection. The coronavirus is taking us to the extreme of what we have been doing as a society — distancing ourselves from each other. By taking away for a time all the opportunities for fellowship in person, perhaps we will become aware of what we are missing in our lives. Humans are made for personal connection. Some thrive on more connection, while others on less, but we all need it.

Maybe when this crisis is over, we will seek to rekindle the human connections that we have been missing. Worshiping together will be important. If we have to miss worship for a month, it may remind us how important corporate worship is for us, and we may be less inclined to "take a Sunday off."

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Prior to the virus outbreak, traditionalist Methodists had been brainstorming about the kind of characteristics that they were looking for in an emerging new denomination. One essential element is that we go deep in our connective life, looking for ways to connect with others about what God is doing in our spiritual lives. John Wesley's "class meetings" formed the basis of Methodism for over 100 years. It was where people talked about "how it is with your soul." (When was the last time you had that kind of conversation?) Where people shared their struggles and triumphs, receiving the support, encouragement, and prayers of the others in the group.

This kind of "social engagement" is life-giving. It is essential to our spiritual growth in maturity. It is what Wesley meant by "social holiness." There is no such thing as a "solitary Christian."

Of course, there is another kind of "engagement" that can be prompted by this unique time in our lives. Not only are humans made for personal connection with each other, we are also made for connection with God. God himself is a "social connection" — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in eternal fellowship with each other. But God made us in his image, to be relational with each other and most importantly with him.

Now that there is no football, basketball, or baseball (or maybe even golf!) to watch on TV, perhaps we can take this opportunity to refocus on our connection with God. Maybe we can slow our lives down enough to spend more time with the creator of our lives, the one who brought us into this world and is preparing us for the next.

Thomas Paine began his 1776 essay "The Crisis" with the famous words, "These are the times that try men's souls." Times of adversity and challenge are a test. They test what we are made of, what we really believe, and what our life is built upon. These times are an opportunity to refocus on what is most important, to recheck and strengthen our foundation. What will these times demonstrate about our lives?

I worked with a youth leader who used to say, "These are the times when good testimonies are made." What will be our testimony that comes out of this time of trial? Will we testify to the faithfulness of our loving Father, to a closer walk with our Savior? Will we testify to a rekindled desire to connect with others, to build deeper relationships with family and friends, to a renewed desire to go deeper in the faith with our brothers and sisters in Christ? Will "social distancing" become the new normal, or will we rebound to a deeper "social engagement?" Time will tell.