

CHALLENGES FROM CHANGES ARE OPPORTUNITIES: REDUCING GAPS IN RECOVERING

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on our lives and has fundamentally changed the way we live, work, and interact with each other. Challenges are for everyone, regardless of class, learning, or wealth. However, there is a gap in the speed of recovering and seeking a way to the “normal world. This paper will examine the changes since the pandemic, the challenges since we entered the era, and the opportunities for current and future missions and ministries. By sharing where the gap exists, some practical suggestions for reducing the gap, which can be another meaning of our mission, will be presented.

INTRODUCTION

Things we only heard in words and only saw in movies happen in our lives every day since entering the pandemic era, and there were many trials and errors in the process of going through them. As unprecedented and unpredictable side effects arose, we were busy finding solutions on a case-by-case basis and are still solving problems. Recognizing there will be no chance to be virus-free, we admit our life will go with the situation rather than eliminating the issue. Even as the saying goes, “living together with Covid, we are attempting to return to “normal life by changing our attitude toward problems from escape to acceptance.

The world has changed more rapidly in less than five years than in the past. The change has a negative part but can also be positive, depending on the perspective. What we are currently experiencing is happening to anyone, regardless of class, learning, or wealth. However, there may be a gap between those who have the essence of this world and those who do not, at the speed of recovering from the impacts or finding exits from difficult situations caused by the impacts.

The following will look at changes since the pandemic, challenges in the present, and opportunities for the future and share a few things to support finding out what we can do to reduce the gap and putting it into practice, which can be another meaning of our mission.

CHANGES SINCE WE ENTERED IN THE PANDEMIC ERA

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted the world. The impacts are representatively on public health, work and education, travel and tourism, the

economy, and mental health.

Awareness of Public Health

As public health became compulsory, interest in individual health and the concept of public health were strengthened. COVID-19 has brought public health to the forefront of people's minds and has increased awareness of hygiene's importance.

The Concept of Home

In terms of the way of life, the perception of the home has changed from the primary purpose of eating, sleeping, and resting to a “hub or “total space. It is because more time is spent at home. People started making it a multi-purpose space by reducing outside entry and changing the environment so they could stay home as much as possible. Worship services are more “available at the place where we usually spend time, and worship at home becomes abundant and accessible because of publicly shared materials.

Educational Modality

Many schools were not ready to deliver teaching and learning channels when schools had to close due to the pandemic at the beginning. There was not enough time to restructure the curriculum or run a trial model by testing an existing learning tool. They were just busy adopting a new technology to seek to connect with learners. Luckily, countries that already began developing tools and technologies for online learning did not take much time to provide regular classes to students. However, the curriculum was not the same as face-to-face courses. Unfortunately, students in communities and countries where educational technology has lagged behind have lost their learning. A learning opportunity gap due to the lack of access to remote learning may be caused by the limited availability of electricity, connectivity, devices, and accessible technologies. The gap is more significant for children from low-income households, children with disabilities, and girls, especially in communities where discrimination and social and gender norms strongly exist.

Moreover, younger students experienced less access to remote learning, which resulted in more learning loss than older students. For kids in pre-K, as it is a pivotal age of development, such a change in learning modality impacted them more since remote learning was not accessible to them as much as older students. According to the report by World Bank, “The State of the Global Education Crisis: A Path to Recovery (Rogers et al., 2021), the data shows that 258 million

primary- and secondary-school age children and youth were out of school, which means the world was already experiencing a learning crisis even before the Pandemic. As pointed out above, learning losses were more significant for students of lower socioeconomic status in various countries, including Ghana, Mexico, and Pakistan (Ahlgren et al., 2022). In South Africa and Mexico, girls faced more considerable learning losses because the gendered impact of school closures on learning still emerged during the Pandemic.

CHALLENGES THAT WE ARE COPING WITH

We discussed the changes human beings have experienced since 2019, when the pandemic struck. Such changes challenged us because we dealt with unprecedented questions and cases, and such challenges are still around us.

Anxiety and fear

Due to the uncertainty of the situation, which applies to all areas of life, including work status, people feel anxious or fearful about returning to their regular routines and activities.

Economic recovery

The pandemic has severely impacted many businesses, and due to the loss of jobs, many families have gone through financial difficulties. Although back to normal status, it may take time for the economy to recover fully.

Adjusting to social interactions

People took time to adjust to social distance and distance relationships when the pandemic happened. Now, they need to adjust them back to social interactions. After a long period of social distancing, some people may feel awkward or uncomfortable when it comes to interacting with others in person.

The pandemic has shown that remote work is possible for many industries, which may lead to more flexible work arrangements. As we already saw it has been happening, the home became a multi-purpose space.

At the beginning of the pandemic, it seemed the rate of crimes in communities decreased, but it was mainly because people started staying at home rather than going outside. However, crimes and violence in hidden places increased. According to the report by the UN (2021), “Millions of women, children and men worldwide are out of work, out of school and without social support in the continuing COVID-19 crisis, leaving them at greater risk of human trafficking.

In addition, data and reports show that all types of violence against women and girls, particularly domestic violence, have intensified since the outbreak of Covid-19 (UN Women). While spending more time with families because of the lockdown was advantageous, the frequency of arguments and conflicts among family members has increased.

While shifts to remote work have somewhat improved the distribution of household responsibilities, women continue to take on more of the chores and shoulder more of the responsibility for overall household management. Such increased responsibilities negatively impact women’s mental health, driving increased rates of anxiety and feelings of dissatisfaction (Yuko, 2022).

SEEKING OPPORTUNITIES

Although it seems the pandemic leaves us only with challenges and difficulties, such challenges can be opportunities for us.

Increased focus on public health

The Pandemic alerted the world about public health, which is not only for us but also for families and others. The emphasis on public health by the government and local community may lead to increased investment in healthcare and disease prevention, which can support our medical missions and ministries. We must be attentive to collaborative opportunities to support those we pray for.

Embracing new technologies

The pandemic has accelerated the adoption of new technologies. National and international organizations recognized the gap in learning opportunities in underdeveloped countries due to the limited electricity and technologies that became larger due to the pandemic. Such recognition can create more opportunities for us to reach out to more people faster and easier. For example, when doctors, nurses, or therapists do not need to see patients, we can connect a local medical team with professional doctors remotely to see patients virtually (Yuko, 2022).

More widely accepted teletherapy

Since there is an increased need for mental health, counseling, and therapy can be good resources for ministries. Virtual counseling or connection (not home visits) can be good sources for remote people who need someone to talk to and pray together (Yuko, 2022).

Flexible work arrangements

The pandemic has shown that remote work is possible for many industries, which may lead to more flexible work arrangements. As we already saw it has been happening, the home became a multi-purpose space. Home means more than before, with more functions as people spend more time at home. We

can encourage people to utilize their homes for cell or small group activities rather than only doing them at church.

Increased appreciation for social connections

The pandemic highlighted the importance of social connections. One of the great opportunities in the post-pandemic era is being more “acceptable. Generally, people resist changes because of fear of uncertainty and an unknown future; however, they had to confront the fear to continue their life. Since entering the pandemic, people have become more accepting and appreciative of social connections.

It is important to review changes and challenges because we can develop our missions and ministries based on what we learned through the changes and challenges that the world and communities are facing.

1. Women’s Ministry

As shown earlier, the impact of Covid-19 happened more negatively for women and younger children. In some countries, resources and efforts have been diverted from violence against women’s response to immediate COVID-19 relief (UN Women). As we learned that the impact on women’s mental health drives increased rates of anxiety and feelings of dissatisfaction, we can empower women by supporting them spiritually and mentally. By building and cultivating a supportive community, we can support them to encourage one another in difficult situations. They can help one another stand firmly with God in their home and work positions by sharing information and resources. With realistic and topical sharing, we can help more effectively women who struggle due to limited information and awareness about available services and limited access to support services. Although opening is challenging in certain cultural contexts, we can encourage them to recognize that they have a supporting community in which they can share and be relaxed, by creating a “secure place to share.

2. Children and Youth Ministry

The times are particularly difficult for those growing into adulthood and finding their place in the world. There is no doubt that the pandemic fairly punched everyone; however, it could be varied in the speed of adjusting to the “new normal world that is different from the normal that we used to feel comfortable with. For older youth and young adults, marriages, dating, and jobs, some youth lost their celebration and milestones in their life, such as graduation, entering school, and leaving school. They might be confused about what is important and what is expected and common in their life. We can support our younger generations by attracting and including them via virtual meetings, emails, texts, letters, and advertisements. Tuning to their ongoing struggles, we can help them focus on their life with God and find and prioritize what is important. All contacts might

sound gong to them, but there can be a “click moment for some (Powell, 2020).

Whether faster or slower, the transition back to the normal world after COVID-19 will likely present both challenges and opportunities. With the recognition of challenges, we can maximize our opportunities in our mission and ministries. While doing so, it is important to remain adaptable and open-minded as we navigate this process.

The following are suggestions reported by an international organization (Britto, 2022), which we can take away some for our missions and ministries.

- Ensure parents understand the value of education and empower them to support their children’s learning and development;
- Ensure all children return to school and are supported to catch-up on lost learning so that they can master foundational learning and numeracy skills and gain 21st century skills;
- Invest in teachers and promote opportunities for professional development and access to the adequate tools;
- Accelerate the digital transformation to promote inclusion, equality and quality education for all children.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on our lives and has fundamentally changed the way we live, work, and interact with each other. Each country experiences a different speed of going back to the normal world. Many people look forward to returning to normalcy in places where vaccines become more widely available. Whether faster or slower, the transition back to the normal world after COVID-19 will likely present both challenges and opportunities. With the recognition of challenges, we can maximize our opportunities in our mission and ministries. While doing so, it is important to remain adaptable and open-minded as we navigate this process.

We are experiencing an unprecedented case, Covid-19; however, there is already an example of how we can connect to share God’s love, as shown in the Bible. The apostle Paul sent letters to people while he was in prison to get connected with them and encourage them to walk with God.

“Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear. (Philippians 1:12 - 14, New International Version)

Paul’s ministry was not limited by his “social distancing, but the limited situation somewhat greatly enhanced it. His positive acceptance and openness to the situation have been impacting people through his teaching, exhortation, warnings, and prayer in our hands for over 2000 years.

We can take a moment to think about effective ministries for distance and strategies not only for the immediate present but also for future plans. Being mindful of the opportunities given by the challenging era, we can propel sharing His love without excuse.

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