

## Column

Almost weekly someone asks: “How is your church coping with the pandemic? What kind of effect is it having on day-to-day operations? How are *you* doing?”

These, of course, are huge questions. No aspect of family, civic or church life – I dare say – has been left untouched by the events of the past eleven months. In answering such questions, I usually begin by giving a very ‘Pauline’ answer.

In the letter Paul wrote from prison to the church at Philippi, he accentuates the positive. He says: “I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel” (Philippians 1:12).

In the verses following, he explains how. First, he says that being in prison has given him new opportunities to get the Word out. The targets of his witness in that dark place were the palace guards and others who came and went. Reading between the lines, it seems likely he had made some converts there, and that no doubt gave him joy.

The other positive thing he reports to his friends at Philippi was that other Christian teachers and preachers were gaining courage from his example. In response, they were ramping up their efforts in getting the Gospel out, also an occasion of joy for Paul.

I see a similarity between what happened to Paul in prison and what has happened since the beginning of COVID 19 in our own day. The pandemic and all that has gone with it has caused some to think deeper and to ask big questions: questions about God, questions about what’s wrong with our world, questions about human destiny. With these questions, have come fresh opportunities for Christian people to share the hope that is within them.

More than that, with the COVID crisis has come new chances for us in the church to think bigger than we have ever thought before and to exploit technology for the furtherance of the Gospel. At the church I serve, this has meant non-traditional worship options, including: drive-in services and on-line worship. As I told a recent enquirer, more people are attending our services now – by one means or another – than ever before, some as far away as the UK and Canada.

Life since COVID has been different. New challenges have presented themselves weekly if not daily. Even so, with uncertainty and danger has come new courage and boldness to speak and live God's Word.

Let me quickly add that by stating the 'positive' aspects of this crisis, I do not mean to minimize the pain and suffering of those who have struggled with the disease themselves, have cared for family members with it, lost loved ones or experienced economic deprivation because of it. Rather, it is to say God remains on the job, and we should as well. Richard Baxter, the Puritan poet and preacher, gives us our marching orders when he writes: "Let all thy days till life shall end, whate'er He sends, be filled with praise!"

Behind 'praise', we might want to pencil in, innovation.

*ALMIGHTY God, who seest that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves; Keep us both outwardly in our bodies, and inwardly in our souls; that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Book of Common Prayer, Collect for the Second Sunday in Lent).*

*The Rev. Victor H. Morgan is rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Blue Ridge.*