



**Wisconsin Conference
United Church of Christ**

Coping with Covid-19: A Personal Perspective

by Larry A. Braskamp

In late May, I tested positive (infected) with the COVID- 19 virus. After 29 days in quarantine, I “count it all joy” that I am now negative and have freedom. In this reflection, I share some highlights and struggles of my journey in isolation as context for making some suggestions for church communities as they begin to further open up in this new era.

I was shocked that I got COVID-19, since my wife, Judi, and I had been very cautious, given our age and Judi’s preexisting health condition. I have no idea how I got it. I quarantined in our bedroom, with a bed, TV, easy chair and bathroom and a beautiful view of Lake Michigan. We communicated by phone. I opened the door three times a day to get my meals prepared by my very supportive wife, an excellent cook. During this period we celebrated our 56th wedding anniversary, waving to each other ten feet away. I can best illustrate my month by sharing the survey I completed each morning for my hospital. I indicated the frequency I have had a fever, a cough, shortness of breath, sore throat, muscle aches, trouble sleeping, lack of energy, feel ill, diarrhea, or stomach pain. I had no energy at the beginning, no desire to read, watch movies, or watch the news. I just slept most of the time, focusing on my survival. Since I had only a slight fever, I was judged to have a mild case. But a month before I tested positive I had begun to experience a constant lightheadedness, which stayed with me throughout my quarantine. Weeks later it has not completely gone away. All of my treatments were by telemedicine, except for the four times I walked six blocks to the hospital’s COVID-19 testing site.

My state of mind. However, my responses to three questions on the survey best describe my well-being during this time. They capture the emotional stress I faced (as is common with others I’m told). They are: I worry that the

infection will get worse; I worry about spreading my infection; I feel overwhelmed by my condition. In the first two weeks I feared that my condition would get worse—I would end up in the hospital on a ventilator. It became a life-and-death issue continually on my mind. With one cough, I would panic and think that I am headed for the hospital soon. I also worried about my wife getting the virus, since she has a pre-existing health condition. And I felt overwhelmed especially at the beginning having brief moments of utter despair and complete hopelessness. My physical isolation and anxiety over the uncertainty and unpredictability of the virus had a multiplier effect. The treatment offered by the experts of “just wait it out” was not comforting.

Self-reflections. I took to writing self-reflections to better discern meaning and purpose in my life and my future. What has been and should be essential in my life? I started them with a short commentary on a selected Bible passage. My reflections, usually written from 1 – 3 am, were raw, very inarticulate, and grossly inadequate in describing my feelings and thinking. But the mere writing of these gave me some peace and insights. The first one was “Alone, together” and the last one was “By the Grace of God.” I discovered, not surprisingly, that ultimate meaning in my life is still heavily based on my Calvinist worldview—God’s grace and providential presence in my life—which I learned growing up from my family and local church. But the Grace of God became more than some theological abstract term.

Surprisingly and joyfully I found it very meaningful knowing that family and friends—persons of various faith traditions or no religious faith—were thinking of me. (Two church communities, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, where we have been members for three decades, and First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois, where we were members three-four decades ago, were bountiful in their grace.) It provided comfort, at times considerable strength and motivation to endure—giving me hope through my uncertain, unpredictable, uncontrollable future. It was manifested beautifully by the daily thoughts and prayers, expressed in emails, cards, phone calls, Zooms and food. I will never forget when one of my granddaughters (age 14) said, “Grandpa, I am praying for you to get negative.” As I write this now in my freedom, I am so thankful that “By the Grace of God, I am alive and well— I didn’t go to the hospital. I can play tennis again.”

Suggestions for Churches

I wish to provide some suggestions based on my experience to churches that are beginning to open up. When I told my friends and family that I was infected, many replied with these two comments. “I now know someone who has it—I can check it off,” and “If you who have been so careful can get it, maybe I am next.” Unfortunately many more may still be infected in the future. My suggestions range from the concrete to comprehensive initiatives.

Care for those with COVID-19 and their caregivers isolated by this virus. Both will no doubt experience loneliness and anxiety even being overwhelmed at times. Thus communication—emails, notes, Zooming, and telephone—among those in and out of quarantine is helpful. The power of people cannot be overestimated. I experienced it so powerfully. Communication makes the virus more personal, which can benefit everyone in understanding and showing empathy. Communication must respect the privacy of those isolated and the church’s guidelines.

Care for older adults. Recognize that many, especially older adults, who have not been infected with the virus, have been forced to be isolated. They cannot enjoy the social relationships that they have had at church before the virus. Many are lonely and depressed, they tell me. They need the support and prayers of others as well.

Engage church members of all ages. Provide opportunities for members of a church to reflect on their goals, aspirations, values, and of course their faith. Reflection requires us to look inward; not an easy endeavor. Are we being asked or even forced to adapt our lives to discover meaning and purpose given at this time? What is essential in our lives now and in the future? How adaptive do we need to be and for how long—maybe for the rest of our lives? Is there a new definition of well-being needed individually and for the church collectively?

Revisit the meaning of “Vocation.” This period is a good time to reflect on vocation as a useful way to think of our lives moving forward. I like how Frederick Buechner defines it, “The place where God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” It is this interdependence between our life and the lives of others that makes this definition so useful in thinking about how we can live a meaningful life during this era. We cannot take our vocation seriously or completely until we include our relationships with others in our thinking and actions.

Acknowledge and accept loss. Acknowledge that there is loss in the way we have been engaged in church. To plan to get back to normal, the way we have been, as soon as possible, is not a valid or useful mindset. Change is inevitable, which means accepting and moving beyond grief over what we will miss in moving forward as a church community. When I walked to my office at Elmhurst College to begin my day, I went past the statue of Reinhold Niebuhr, a graduate, which has these words printed on its base: “God, give me the grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.” Accepting the loss of where we were is needed as we think and experiment with new strategies to develop a new form of community in the church. “What is essential in our lives and in our religious communities?”

Recognize that individuals best develop in community. Hold steadfast to the fact that we best develop as individuals when we are in community—being engaged with others. Isolation is a dangerous thing from a developmental point of view. We grow and develop in our faith when we live a life surrounded by support and challenge. The church as a community of believers can play such an important role in developing each of us in our spiritual, social, intellectual life. The church is a community that supports—gives us comfort—but also provides the necessary challenge to grow. Our task as a church in this new era is to discover how to provide an optimal environment for each person to grow in their faith.

Welcome the opportunity. Finally, embrace the fact that the church is challenged and now has an opportunity to address three overlapping crises—COVID -19, collapse of the economy, and racial inequity. We are witnessing “history in the making.” How do we as a church community respond and act? The church can become a powerful voice in moving our society forward. But more than spoken words is needed. Institutional commitment and action is required. Church communities can contribute by offering understanding, based on our faith traditions, and be engaged in action-filled solutions working collaboratively with other institutions. Now is our opportunity.

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