

# A FAMILY-FIRST POST-COVID STRATEGY

**"We've never been here before."**

**"This is unreal."**

**"What are we going to do?"**

We've all heard the panicked reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic and the shutdowns in our economy and communities, including our churches. However, I submit we have been here before, and we have a reliable story and road map to guide us through our present situation.

We would do well to compare the current COVID-19 restrictions to the life and times of those Israelites exiled (in two waves) to Babylon in 598 and 587 BC. This biblical history can guide us through this difficult time in our church life.

Like those Israelites of ancient times, we have been "cut off" from our places of worship and cannot gather in large groups. We are living in anxious days, worried about who will get sick and die, and trying our best to care for those most vulnerable. We also are clueless regarding how long the crisis will continue, with no end in sight until a vaccine is developed and widely distributed.

The Jews in Babylonian exile learned many things: first, God had not abandoned them but had orchestrated the very exile they faced. He used the process to refine His people, holding them accountable for sin and idolatry in their home country. Second, God was with them everywhere they went, even Babylon. He was not tied to the Temple in Jerusalem. Third, the exiled Jews learned to be flexible and, since they could no longer offer sacrifices at the Temple, they formed synagogues (i.e. churches) where they could study God's Word together and pray for one another during their times of need. These small units of believers only needed ten adult men to form, and they spread far and wide throughout the Jewish community. Finally, they learned to adapt to their new normal. God told them through His prophets that they would remain in exile for at least 70 years, and to buy land, start businesses, and raise their families. We can learn similar lessons from our current situation (if we will).

**First, God has not abandoned us either.** He is still in charge of everything, and He has a plan for us, not to harm us but to make us stronger and better (Romans 8:28). Maybe He is challenging us to give up our

“idolatry” of big, fancy buildings or large numbers in worship services, or the idolatry surrounding big name preachers and religious celebrities who draw enormous crowds. All of that is gone for now.

**Second God is still with us, wherever we are.** He is bigger than any church building or campus. We have been reminded the church is really the people, not the building where we gather. Most churches that recently went online with their services have been amazed by the huge numbers of people following them and watching online—far greater than the numbers previously attending in person.

**Third, we have learned to be flexible.** We have had to find new ways to disciple, adapting to our new normal by gathering virtually, in small groups in homes or, as family units. We have been forced from the walls of our churches to take the gospel into the places we live and work on a daily basis.

**Fourth, we understand this “new normal” may be with us for a while.** Hopefully not 70 years, but it could easily be with us for one to two years, or until a viable vaccine has been created and distributed widely. How will we “do church” during this season? Will we pivot to empower the family to be the front line of the church? Will we give parents back the responsibility to disciple their own children? Will we develop and strengthen small-group ministries so they are no longer “hidden away” in church basements but active on the front lines of ministry and service in the community?

**Like those Jews long ago, we must let exile become our saving grace!** Through that experience, their leaders learned to stand up for God (Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego; Mordecai and Esther; Ezekiel, Ezra, Nehemiah; among others), they fell in love with the Word of God, and they emerged from the experience refined and on fire for God. This Covid-19 experience can be the same for us today. It can halt us in our tracks, cause us to lose our footing and to give ground in our culture, or even make us disappear from history (the fate of the northern kingdom that did not learn from exile). Or, it can be the springboard for new and innovative ministries where our people mix and mingle with the lost and make a difference in Jesus’ name. Now is the time to think, to pray and to plan for the future, and to see what God has in store for us.

### **We Need New “Metrics.”**

For generations, the church in America has been following the “Attractional Model” of ministry. Our wins have been centered around how many people attended big events (revival meetings, VBS, homecoming, concerts, holiday festivities). Now, big events are actively discouraged, and groups of more than ten people in one room are frowned upon. How do we pivot toward a new standard of behavior? What should we measure and track during this season of our church life? What should a win look like these days?

**I suggest we adopt a “Missional Model” of ministry.** We should follow health and safety guidelines and prioritize small groups of people doing ministry together, starting with the basic family unit. Call this initiative “Families First” if you like.

**Begin by enlisting church families** to commit to a personal, daily quiet time and to lead their families in daily discipleship: reading the Bible together; praying; and engaging in direct, spiritual, age-appropriate conversations. You can track the number or percentage of your church families making this pledge.

**Encourage parents to sign a pledge** acknowledging and agreeing to accept their role as their children's primary disciplers. Sadly, in the modern church era, many parents have relinquished that role to Sunday School teachers and youth leaders. Many options are available for daily curriculum, both online and in print. Start with Randall House EveryDay curriculum, which walks families through day-by-day discipleship at home. Follow up on virtual church services, going over the various points of the pastor's sermon and putting an emphasis on applying those points to life. Ask your children, for example, after a sermon about the Good Samaritan: "How can we be good Samaritans to our neighbors?" Let the children offer their suggestions and then do them together as a family.

**Take the "Family First" initiative to the next level by asking "Star Families" to step forward** and make a commitment to use their homes as ministry outposts in their neighborhood. They can begin by prayer walking the streets around their home. Then they host an event at their house once a month (family movie night on the lawn, cookout, scavenger hunt, etc.). From there, relationships can be developed and a home Bible study can begin. The possibilities are endless. The point is, **the family becomes the face of the church** in their respective communities and the church expands/explodes into new avenues of ministry. Be sure to commission these families in the worship service and recognize their exemplary behavior in taking the Light of Christ into their respective neighborhoods. Then, celebrate their success as a church.

Adopting the "Family First" mentality in other areas of church life can be a simple affair. Sunday School classes, small groups, and discipleship groups can all mimic the activities outlined in the Family First model by 1) keeping groups small; and 2) seeking ministry opportunities to serve the community in Jesus' name as they become available.

By substituting the historical, church-building focused Attractional Model of ministry with a new, mobile, and flexible Missional Model, we not only move with the currents of change in our society today but also set our churches up to thrive moving forward, empowering families to step to the front line of ministry rather than continuing as spectators on the sidelines.

**About the Writer:** Dr. Kelton F. Hinton is associational missions strategist for the Johnston Baptist Association. Find more resources for dealing with COVID-19 at [nafwb.org/Jeremiah29](http://nafwb.org/Jeremiah29). Order the new EveryDay family discipleship curriculum from Randall House: [store.RandallHouse.com](http://store.RandallHouse.com).



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