



THE CHURCH OPERATIONS TOOLKIT

COVID-19 REOPENING INSIGHTS

INTERVIEW WITH EXECUTIVE PASTOR SCOTT BAKER

Scott Baker is the Executive Pastor of The Bridge in Bixby, Oklahoma. Velocity Ministry Management did consulting work for The Bridge in 2014 and has kept in contact with Scott ever since. The Bridge has worked diligently to reopen carefully as their community leaders lifted COVID-19 restrictions.

In this interview, we discussed how they planned their reopening and what that process has looked like.

5 Key Insights:

- 1. Planning must be more detailed and flexible than usual.** Plan carefully and be ready to adjust plans as conditions change.
- 2. You'll need more volunteers.** If you intend to restart children's ministry, you'll need more people to help children stay separated as much as possible. You'll also need volunteers to clean and disinfect surfaces between services. Unfortunately, the number of available volunteers may be impacted as some are at greater risk to the virus or don't feel comfortable returning to church yet.
- 3. Get creative with communication.** Facebook Lives, hosts for online services, panel discussions, and more are ways to keep the congregation informed.
- 4. Focus on what's most important.** Scott mentioned that this situation has helped their team become more effective and efficient. They're constantly reevaluating things and view this experience as a "purifying kind of fire."
- 5. Extend lots of grace.** As Scott mentions, people are under a lot of stress right now. Normalcy has been thrown away and we don't know when (or if) "normal" will return. Offer others grace and ask they extend it to you as well as your team seeks to make tough decisions.

Obviously, dealing with COVID-19 is a very fluid situation. As we learn more about this virus, how it spreads, and what mitigation steps have the greatest impact, we may need to adjust our approaches. This interview provides one church's perspective and how they've navigated this highly unusual situation.



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Deborah: So, how are things in Oklahoma with COVID? Some states seem to be seeing a reemergence lately. How's that coming along for you guys?

Scott: We were, if not the first, we were close to the first to probably start phase one and then move to phase two and then phase three, but we've been in phase three now since June 1st. And just in the past week, a week and a half, there've been increases in positive cases. And they haven't really seen much of an increase in hospitalizations and no real increase in deaths, but they have seen an increase in positive cases. Most of that has to do with... I mean, it's a different demographic than the first round in that it's mostly between 18 and 49 year olds is the majority of the cases. So, they may be more resilient, more healthy, more easily able to recover, I guess, is probably what's going on. But that's the crowd that's going to be hanging around closely in social occasions and all that kind of stuff, so it kind of makes sense that, as things get a little bit more lax, that's what's happening. And we've got the mayor talking today about the possibility of requiring masks in public and possibly even limiting the number of gatherings in the city of Tulsa. Haven't been hearing that from anybody else in Oklahoma. The governor hasn't said it. Bixby, where we're at, hasn't said anything about it, but there's enough conversation going on that you're going, "Well, okay. We don't really know what's going to happen." Right? Because there's still uncertainty there.

Deborah: I'm not familiar enough with some of the guidelines. Since you went through phase one, two, and three, if cases get back to X number, do you back down a phase and go back down to like phase two or something?

Scott: There isn't a guideline that tells us that. There was a guideline that told us how we would advance to the next phase, and I think there was basically just a general understanding that if we needed to back up, we would. But there's no written guidelines or nobody's actually said that officially at all, so we don't know.

Deborah: Okay. Are guys requiring masks at the church right now?

Scott: No. No. We're making it not a note of contention. If you feel more comfortable wearing one, please do. If you feel more comfortable staying at home, please do. We're wanting to meet you where you're at.

Deborah: Sure. When did you guys have your first service back in person?

Scott: First one was May 3rd. That was the first weekend that the Oklahoma guidelines permitted it. And we basically used Brushfire and set up reservations, maximum of 150 people, which is basically a third of our auditorium, and escorted people in, escorted them to find a seat that was distanced enough, and it worked fine. We did wear masks at that point. We started all of our sanitization procedures and still do that to this day, but we did the reservations for three weeks. We started on Good Friday. We started a Saturday night drive-in service. So, we built a big stage outside in the parking lot and ended up probably having, oh, 100 to 150 cars every weekend. They would come and be a part of that.



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Deborah: Are you still doing that?

Scott: No, we continued that through May, and basically ended at the last Saturday of May, which I think was the 31st. And so, we basically closed our Saturday night service. Basically, we just said, "Look, we're not going to do Saturday night service anymore. We're going to focus on Sunday services." And it logistically it would have been really difficult to do a Saturday service. It just would've been really challenging inside, so we just decided to close it. So, for the first three weeks in May, we continued registrations, we continued masks, we continued escorting people into the building. Services were pretty lightly attended. I mean, I don't think we ever had... Maybe one time we had 100 people there. Right? And so, then we basically just took the limit off, stopped registering people, stopped checking them in. We would still help them find a seat. We still maintain distance in our rows and all that kind of thing, but really just let people start to self-govern.

Deborah: So, that was like 1st of June timeframe?

Scott: No, phase two, actually... So, phase one started May 3rd. Actually, May 1st. Phase two started May 15th, but we went an extra week basically treating it like it was phase one. And so, then we basically took the limits off after the third week in May, I guess the fourth week in May. We took the limits off, but everybody pretty much stayed the same, as far as the numbers and that kind of thing. It's grown slowly over the weeks, but it's really evident that there's a lot of people being very cautious, and we started, in June, we started what we call family service. So, we're in a phase three, and we were inviting kids to come with their parents. And we do something special for them in service as a part of our regular service, and that allowed for some of the kids to come back. We let our children's pastor set that up and give them busy bags during service so they had things to do. Tried to recreate something special because we just couldn't do the kids thing yet. So, we've continued that through June, we're going to continue that through this Sunday, and then in July, we're starting back with kids' ministry in just our early service.

Deborah: Okay. Yeah. I was wondering if you'd been able to start kids ministry back up because that's the hardest part because they don't socially distance.

Scott: They don't even know if they're doing anything wrong.

Deborah: Yeah, I mean, it's hard to explain it to them.

Scott: It's really difficult, but I think we've got it set up pretty well to where we can do that pretty darn good. But we're really trying to... We have to have a lot of volunteers to do it. Okay? So, this week we had our big volunteer rally, which actually we had planned for April 1st when everything shut down. So, we've ramped up the interest in coming back to volunteer all during the month of June and had our big volunteer rally last night. And we needed it because we have a lot of new processes, new systems, new way of doing things, all that kind of stuff. Everybody needed to be trained. So, went through that process last night. It was a hit. I mean, everybody came. It was great.



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Scott: We probably need at least one and a half to one and three quarters volunteers more than before this whole thing started right for the kids, because you got to work to keep them separated and keep them safe and all that kind of stuff. So, that means we don't have enough volunteers to do both services yet. Right? And so, we chose the service we want, we still want to leave our 11:00 AM service as the front door service for people to be able to come that are new and visiting and that kind of thing, so we want as much space available in the 11:00 AM service as possible. So, we've been pushing kids to come, for family service, at the 9:00 AM service, and so now we're going to roll that into a kid's 9:00 AM, basically, their own services, their own classes. So, that starts not this week, but next week.

Deborah: Okay. How has communication happened through all this as you were starting to reopen things? Is it email, social media? How are you keeping the congregation up to date?

Scott: Yeah, we've used everything, so we've gotten really good at using all the social media outlets. We don't use Twitter, but we use Instagram and we use Facebook and we do... It's very intentional, right? We started doing little 30 second videos from our lead pastor telling them something that people need to know about. And we're doing little live streams, right? Short little live stream. So, before phase one, before phase two, and before phase three, we had a livestream panel discussion where we basically live stream. And we actually encourage people to chat into our live stream with their questions, and we answered all their questions so they would know what to expect and what's coming and what's not coming, all of that kind of thing. And that was actually probably one of our biggest and most effective ways, because then that lives on Facebook, and people that have questions, we can just point them to the video. And it's been watched like four times more in the playback than it was live, so it's been pretty effective way to communicate. Obviously, we've done announcements, we've done videos, just basically posted to our websites. We have done videos during our service, in the transitions. We did, for two months, two and a half months, we did a pre-service show. Right? Which was a 15 minute lead up to our show. I mean, it was a show to lead up to our service. So, the show was basically... Think of Kathy Lee and Hoda. Right? It was two people that really like to talk and really liked to talk about anything, and they just bounce stuff back and forth about what's going on and how it's going on and how do you feel about that? What are we doing about that? So, it was very entertaining, people got a lot of good information out of that. Yeah. I mean, that's the kind of stuff we did.

Deborah: You mentioned sanitizing. I've seen questions about this, obviously, in the Facebook group and other venues, there's a lot of questions about how are you sanitizing, especially if you have cloth on your pews or chairs. How have you guys approached that?

Scott: So, we found a special product out of Kentucky (Editors' Note: Ionopure is based in TN. You can find more information at ionopure.com) called Ionopure, I think is the name of it, and it is... I mean, it takes like two seconds of a contact, and it kills whatever happens to be on that fabric. Right? We have fabric chairs, which is about the worst thing in the world to try to sanitize because we close one service out and then we have people coming back in to sit right back down behind them. Right? So, if they're wet, that's going to be a problem.



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Scott: Well, this Ionopure, it dries incredibly fast, and so we basically, all the ushers, as soon as people leave, they're walking down the rows spraying this stuff on the chairs. And by the time somebody comes in to sit down, they're already dry. Right? So, it was the perfect solution for us. Besides that, I mean, there's the standard stuff that we're doing. We have all kinds of over the counter cleansers that we're using constantly on door handles and countertops and all that stuff.

Deborah: Yeah. Any high touch surface.

Scott: Yeah. Right.

Deborah: Okay. How have you been able to stay abreast of what the state of Oklahoma is requiring and then any specifics or unique things that maybe the city of Bixby is requiring? How is that process working for you guys?

Scott: Good. I mean, I think you have to be incredibly proactive. You can't just wait until you hear something, and I have people that know that are in the state administration and I am interacting with them and asking them if anything's changing or if there's any new information we need. Same thing with our city government. So, as much as possible, I'm actually trying to have conversations with people that know, and obviously, there's official channels that I'm checking consistently. So we have a great that data-driven state administration here, and all of the data's made available in real time on their various websites. And so, you can literally go see exactly... you can see how things are changing every single day and all the recommendations, all their guidelines, anything that they're doing with regards to press conferences and that kind of thing. It's all available right there. So, we're very fortunate that they're doing that really well. But even at that, I think you have to be super proactive to stay in the loop. Every meeting we have about planning, we're talking about... I just got back from a meeting talking about back to school. Every meeting that we're having, every event we're planning, everything we're thinking about is all 100% tentative, right? I mean, we're going to proceed with the information we have today, assuming that it's going to be at least that good in the future, but the truth of the matter is, we have to be prepared for rolling that back if and when we have that happen. So, we plan as if it's going to be happening, but be prepared for if it's not. And so, you have to plan constantly. It's way more intensive than it used to be, because there's just too many variables at this point.

Deborah: Yeah. So, let's say you're trying to plan like VBS, I'm sure there's a lot of churches that were trying to figure that out or even go back to school event in the fall, is there plan A for assuming the status quo of how things are today and then there's plan B of doing 100% online version just in case?

Scott: Yeah. I mean, it depends on what we're planning. So, in some of the things we're planning, we do, we have to plan a couple of different options more than what we would normally plan. For some of them, we're just planning as if we know it's going to happen, but fully recognizing we may, just at the drop of a hat, have to recoil that and that. So, it's really difficult to plan three different options for everything, so for some of them that are the most critical, we are. For the others, we're just planning to go ahead, and if we have to rethink it, we will.



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Deborah: Yeah. I'm assuming you're still offering online services for folks that just aren't ready to come back yet.

Scott: Yeah. Yeah.

Deborah: How do you engage your congregation online during that? I mean, is it 100% just a live stream of the service, or are there other things that you're doing to keep some level of community going?

Scott: So, we have an online pastor that basically is there, and he's receiving prayer requests and praying for people. And he's commenting on what the message is, or during praise and worship about... He's basically trying to engage them in conversation and to encourage them to have some form of community online. So, we're doing that. In addition to that, we do address the people online directly during the service. The senior pastor does that, both at the beginning of the service and the beginning of the message, and then actually even during the salvation prayer. But that's about the extent of it. When we were doing the pre-show, that was 100% for online. That's all we were doing it for. But our online demand has come back more into normalcy since we've been back, so we've not... It's a little awkward trying to do a pre-show while people are trying to file into the auditorium.

Deborah: Yeah. From a staff perspective, are you guys working in the office now, or is everyone still working from home?

Scott: Yeah. I mean, we were deemed "an essential business" from the very beginning, so everybody that felt comfortable being there did continue coming. I would say there's probably five of us that never stopped coming into the office. Now, probably, I don't know, the past three or four weeks, probably around the 1st of June, pretty much everybody, all the staff were back in.

Deborah: Okay. So, as far as the congregation's reaction to different restrictions, or especially when you're having to limit the number of people in the sanctuary, and now as you're getting ready to try and bring some kids back in for the kids' ministry, how are they handling all of the different changes? And there's been some controversies in different areas about if the state's requiring masks or if the state is asking churches to keep a list of everyone who attends in-person service in case there's an outbreak and contact tracing and stuff. Are those conversations happening with you guys, and what does that look like?

Scott: Yeah. So, I would say... I mean, there's two sides to this, right? There's people who think we're not doing enough, there's people that think we're doing too much. And I would say, overwhelming majority, more than 90% of the criticisms have been, "Why are you guys paying so much attention to this? We don't need to wear this. We don't need to do that. I don't want people knowing my name. If the federal government comes and asks you if I was in service, because somebody got COVID-19, are you going to give them my name?" There's that kind of pushback that we got more than anything else, and basically, everything that we did, we did so to honor...



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Scott: The government is put there as ministers of God in order to be a benefit to us. The scripture is very clear about that. And so, we took that absolutely as non-negotiable. We're going to do what they have asked us to do because we're to honor the system and the people that God's put in place into those positions of ministry, and therefore, that's what we're doing. And, as much as possible, we tried to help people to get there alongside of us and recognize that we need to honor those ministers. But you're always going to have the people who push back, and I got people who refused to register and refused to give their name coming into the service. And basically I said, "That's fine. Can I call you by a number? Or how can I identify you if I need to find you?" And so, basically I would just try to give them as much leeway as I possibly could to still know that somebody with their identity was in the building at the time. And I didn't need their license, I don't need the social security number, I don't need any of that stuff. I just need to know they were there. That's it.

Deborah: Now, did the state of Oklahoma require you guys to keep that information?

Scott: No. No, they did not. If they had required it, we probably would have abided by that, and those people who aren't comfortable doing that, we would have said, "That's fine. You don't need to be here. And when that restriction's taken off, we hope you come back."

Deborah: Sure. Yeah. Looking through my list of questions here to make sure I haven't missed anything. Yeah, other than that, any tips for other churches as they're still navigating this? Some states are about where you guys are at. Some are in hot spots or dealing with more restrictions than you guys are. Any encouragement or advice for folks?

Scott: Well, I mean, we're all in it together. I mean, we've heard that too many times, but the truth is, we're all in the same situation. God, didn't not know this was going to happen. He knew this was going to happen. And we just need to get in sync with Him. He is going to take what has been intended for the destruction of the church and the Judeo-Christian religion and try to cause destruction, and He's going to turn that around and He's going to create something that is bigger and better and more wonderful than anything else. I will tell you, our experience has been, we as a church, as an effective ministry for the kingdom of God, are so much better today because of this. We're more effective, we're more efficient. We're hitting the most important things, really, really, really well. The things we didn't need to be wasting time on, we've let fall off. So, it's made us better at what we're doing, and I think everybody else can have that same experience. And when you're constantly analyze and reanalyze and reanalyze your analyzation, and you do that consistently and consistently and consistently, it keeps you in a constant state of, "Well, maybe we could tweak this. Maybe we could do that better. Maybe we don't really need to be doing that." And it really, in the long run, it ends up being almost a purifying kind of fire that makes you really, really good and pure at what you're doing.

Deborah: Yeah. Kind of forced everyone to rethink how we're doing things and all the different events and all the different programs and all the different ministries, are all of those the main thing?



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Scott: That's right.

Deborah: Yeah. What we really need to be doing, or was that just the flashy new mega church thing that we saw somebody doing that we felt like we needed to jump on that bandwagon all of a sudden or whatever?

Scott: That's right. That is absolutely the truth. And we've learned a lot of lessons through all this. We really have. We learned what's really important and what we really need to hang on to and do extremely well, and I think everybody is going to be able to do the same thing. And be patient. I mean, it's really tough. People are tense. And gosh, there is so much stress because normalcy has just been thrown away. The best coping mechanism we all have in life is normalcy. We can always come back to zero and be okay. Right? And we haven't been able to do that, and so stress is really high. You just got to give people a lot of breaks, just say, "Look, I get it. I understand. You're having a hard time with this," ask them to give you grace in the midst of it, too. We don't need to be pushing against each other. We need to be all pulling in the same direction.

Deborah: Yeah. From a pastoral staff perspective, how have you, that your senior pastor and others, kept your sanity through all this and made sure you're healthy, too?

Scott: We talk a lot, I guess I would say. Even when we weren't meeting in person for staff meetings, we would have our staff meetings or Zoom meetings, and we were actually spending, gosh, sometimes as much as half of our staff meeting would be encouragements, testimonies, and good things that you're seeing come as a result of the things that have happened in the past week. It's really important to focus upon how God is using a really difficult situation for good and to celebrate that and to talk about that, because there might be somebody in that meeting that's just about to lose it and somebody will say something that just is really encouraging. I mean, I think that's it. We just keep encouraging each other, and that's been a huge part of it.

Deborah: Yeah. Awesome. Okay. This is great.