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Steve Case

Involve Youth, case@invovleyouth.org

Benji Ferguson

Carmichael Seventh-day Adventist Church, bferguson@carmsda.org

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PURPOSELY CHANGING CHURCH CULTURE WHEN A PANDEMIC FORCES CHURCH CHANGE

How the COVID Pandemic Impacted One Large SDA Church

Steve Case, PhD and Benji Ferguson, MA

ABSTRACT

The Carmichael SDA Church, located in the suburbs of Sacramento, California, seemed to be a gem in the Northern California Conference, with the largest membership, highest tithe, and largest pastoral staff. The pandemic put a halt to most of this church's ministry, exposing some weaknesses and preventing the ministry it had developed over the years. Simultaneously, new forms of ministry sprung forth because of the sudden changes. The long-term impact of the pandemic challenges this church to move forward in new ways rather than attempting a restart as though nothing happened. This is a case study of how one congregation responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

DENIAL GAVE way to acknowledgment from a distance. Then COVID-19 arrived in our country, and soon our state and county. Next came, "I know someone who..." followed by adaptation, and then outright panic—empty shelves where toilet paper and hand sanitizer previously remained stocked, and no inventory of face masks even via Amazon. Fear and fear-mongering, plus changing recommendations and requirements, resulted in varying responses. Lacking previous pandemic experience, coupled with an inflated sense of entitled greatness and invincibility, life as we knew it changed radically.

Churches, composed of people in their first pandemic experience, found their sanctuaries did not function as sanctuaries—either as a safe place or a gathering place. Churches only half-full dwindled to one-fourth-full or stopped meeting at all. Those who led didn't show up due

to fear, uncertainty, sickness, or even death. In an America that had already marginalized God and religion to the periphery and the private, religious people felt as lost as those they had previously labeled "lost."

GETTING THROUGH A PANDEMIC

The two extremes of "fight" versus "surrender" in response to COVID-19 have spiritual roots and practical applications from a church perspective in addition to their personal and corporate implications.

FIGHT

Those who advocate "fight" exhibit courage, optimism, defiance, enthusiasm, and vision. This includes statements such as, "It will soon pass," "We can beat this," or "I'm not giving in," as well as "It's not as bad as they're making it sound," and "That's wrong; I read on the internet..." plus "No government is going to take away my

religious liberty” or “It’s unconstitutional to stop my right to worship.” While macho drives often associated with sports and the military come to mind, Christianity has its own version of fighting for righteousness’ sake. The song “Onward Christian Soldiers” draws on spiritual warfare (1 Sam 17:45-46, Eph 6:11-13), something that can easily resonate with the SDA metanarrative of “The Great Controversy.”

In the Sacramento area, just a few months into the pandemic, Pentecostal Pastor Greg Fairrington defied California governor Gavin Newsom’s public health order prohibiting indoor gatherings at restaurants, bars, movie theaters, and houses of worship. “The church has been called to fight the government for the right to worship freely, free of persecution and without restriction, even in the clutches of a global pandemic” (Anderson 2020). The pastor continued indoor meetings, spurning stay-at-home lockdowns, social distancing, and mask mandates. The pastor’s daughter got married to one of the worship leaders inside the church on December 31, 2020, during the worst COVID-19 surge of the year (McGough 2020). While similar examples can be found in many newspapers, we chose *The Sacramento Bee* since it reports in the region of the Carmichael SDA Church—the case study for this paper.

Early in the pandemic, an optimistic, national public speaker to collegiates and young adults published strategies to lead Generation Z through COVID-19. His recommended approaches included: remind them of past personal successes, make a habit of talking about silver linings, help them practice psychological distancing, identify cognitive distortions or confirmation bias in their narratives, and practice affirming self-talk (Elmore 2020).

While some lean toward the “fight” orientation or can find themselves drawn to it, others choose a different response, also with Christian roots—“surrender.”

SURRENDER

Those who “surrender” can do so by choice or compulsion, feeling safe or overwhelmed. The synonym “submission” maintains the sense of a greater power, whether that power gets identified as friend or foe. In the pandemic it can be heard as, “Follow the science,” “We’re going to have to work together,” or “Do what you’re told,” as well as, “We’ll have to trust God,” and “Our lives will need to change,” and “People should just follow the rules.”

Postings on the *Sacramento Bee* Facebook page in response to the previously mentioned Pastor Fairrington reacted to his “fight” practices with comments such as, “It’s biblical that we need to follow the laws of the land. The devil cannot stop the gospel! This is a bad representation of Christ and obedience!!!!” and “When people are infected at services, they should be restricted to receiving faith healing only,” and “Whoosh. . . there went Love Thy Neighbor and the Golden Rule, and supporting the community good. NOT a Christian Church; annoying entertainment center using Christian name in vain. Our community needs to get rid of this annoyance” (Swegan, McLennan, and Kabuki 2020).

In South Sacramento, Pastor Les Simmons stated that the health and safety of his 1,000-member congregation remained his main priority at this time. He continued virtual church services even after the US Supreme Court struck down a New York ruling that limited worship gatherings previously (Kasler 2020).

Most churches in the Sacramento area pivoted with the pandemic, shutting their doors and going online or meeting in parking lots or other outdoor spaces when the weather permitted it. By Easter in 2022, state and county health orders no longer hampered worship gatherings (McGough and Yoon-Hendricks 2022).

Churches and church leaders who chose a “surrender” response to the pandemic treated both the virus and the law as forces they would comply with rather than resist. Most likely, those who agreed with them supported such a position, while those who disagreed found a place with more of a “fight” orientation.

THE CARMICHAEL SDA CHURCH

A suburb on the northeastern side of Sacramento, California, the Carmichael SDA Church would be considered significant by Seventh-day Adventist standards. Although not an institutional church with a supporting hospital, college/university, or Adventist-run industry, it has the largest church membership in the Northern California Conference of SDAs (NCC 2021). The Sacramento area has at least 15 churches. Supportive ministries in the general area include the corporate office for Adventist Health, Maranatha Volunteers International headquarters, Amazing Facts and its affiliated congregation, and a day academy with pre-school through grade 12. Sabbath worship attendance pre-pandemic usually ranged from 450-600.

In early 2020, things looked fantastic for the Carmichael SDA Church. We had raised over \$500,000 for a Spring vacation Maranatha mission trip to Peru with 120+ of our members. Church attendance continued to grow, and ministries thrived. The addition of a new discipleship pastor fully staffed the pastoral team for the first time in 12 months. The church felt ready to take some significant steps forward. Our church school was poised for exponential growth. Then everything shut down. In a moment, the mission trip was canceled, church ministries went to standby mode, and school became remote. What began as a two-week shutdown persisted for two years.

Like most churches, the pandemic hit the Carmichael SDA Church broadside, exposing it as unprepared and yet miraculously resilient. In some ways it seemed that everything changed, yet that would be an overstatement. It exposed good and bad, simultaneously creating both positive and negative impacts because it forced a chronic condition rather than an episodic one.

WEAKNESSES EXPOSED

The church is people, not a building. When the COVID-19 lockdown closed the facilities at the Carmichael SDA Church, it soon became apparent that we lacked a network of simple connections with church members. An outdated membership list with 2,000 names seemed both overwhelming and inaccurate compared to our attendance. No phone tree of members existed, nor did anyone initiate one. A handful of highly involved members went into overdrive to take the worship service online with a production surge, but personal contact evaporated. As people hunkered down and the area went into lockdown, reaching out to others seemed unsafe, potentially misunderstood, and untried.

A tool as simple as a church photo directory, in need of updating when the pandemic struck, lost any chance of revision during a lockdown, and the company that produced the directory went out of business. The existing photo directory got relegated to the heap of lost causes.

People formed bubbles with a limited number of social contacts—immediate family members and several others who shared current activities. Such bubbles rarely related to the church. Individuals and families who formed bubbles with people outside of the church slipped through the cracks when it came to the church.

The nearby Adventist school, having years of close connection with the Carmichael SDA Church, soldiered onward with tremendous exertion, creativity, and perseverance. Those affiliated with both school and church found school to be their bubble definer. Many without a school connection lost their church connection as well, especially during lockdown when the church doors remained closed during the week and on the weekend.

Discipleship, assumed to be important, went to the back burner—if such a thing could be possible by definition. Some Sabbath School classes went online, but most took a hiatus. Those not sick from the pandemic turned inward rather than outward. This meant sleeping in Sabbath morning and possibly watching an online church service performed by a few. Another option capitalized on morning trips to a park or bike riding with the possibility of catching the church service later on YouTube. No mechanism from the church tracked involvement, and nobody started anything of that kind. At the same time, people waited out COVID-19 for the few weeks or possibly months we perceived this temporary inconvenience would last.

The switch to online programming thrust a few key people into sprint mode. While feedback indicated an appreciation for the creativity and weekly content, the increased demand for quantity and frequency overworked the newly expanding AV team and exhausted the pastoral staff. This included developing and expanding online production with hardware, a steep learning curve, and the investment of money, time, and personnel. A Friday night worship series for families went into production mode for a few months, but then stopped because Friday nights wouldn't stop. Several Sabbath Schools moved to Zoom, and in a relatively short time, participants made this their “new normal” as the novelty wore off and they got accustomed to the slight delay with online dialogue and the futility of attempting to sing as a group via Zoom. People expected this would fill the void for a few weeks, but nobody anticipated it would continue for years.

Church attendance has become a standard metric for current church success. Figures 1-3 show the church attendance for 2020, 2021, and the first four months of 2022. This includes blanks during two lockdown periods in 2020. The average attendance in 2020 was 360, with a range of 134-599. This includes the pre-pandemic attendance in the first quarter of 2020, which is noticeably

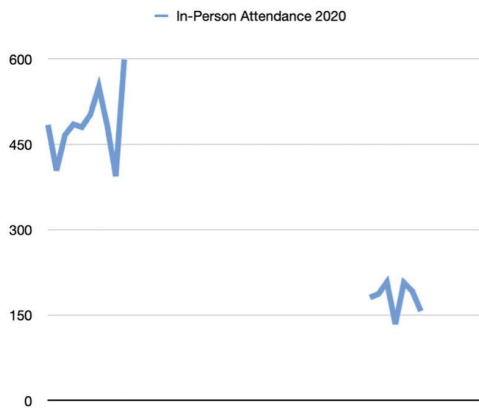


Figure 1. Carmichael SDA Church In-Person Attendance 2020 (Carmichael Church data set retrieved April 19, 2022).

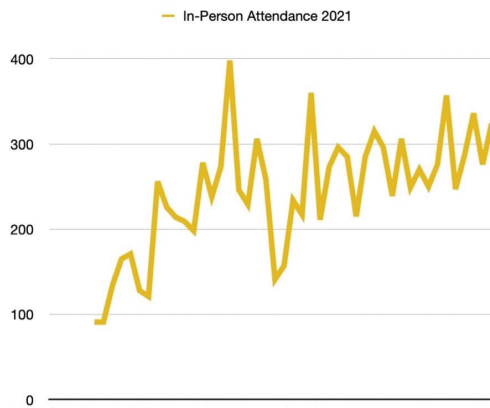


Figure 2. Carmichael SDA Church In-Person Attendance 2021 (Carmichael Church data set retrieved April 19, 2022).

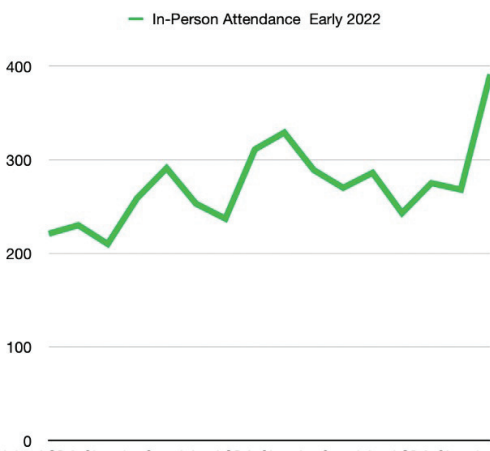


Figure 3. Carmichael SDA Church In-Person Attendance Early 2022 (Carmichael Church data set retrieved April 19, 2022).

higher before the two lockdowns later in the year. The average attendance in 2020 after the pandemic began was 181, with a range of 134-208. This shows a drop of 50 percent. In 2021, the average attendance increased to 243, starting with a low of 91 at the first of the year, following a COVID-19 surge, and reaching a high of 398 for the academy graduation weekend the Carmichael SDA Church hosted. This amounts to two-thirds of attendance before the pandemic. Average attendance for the first three months in 2022 rose more, to an average of 273, with a low of 210 and a high of 391. This took the average to 75 percent of pre-pandemic attendance.

These figures do not include online attendance. Records have been kept for online attendance from March of 2020 through February of 2021, as seen in Figure 4. While the average is 482, with a range of 200-769, these numbers remain soft because they simply count the number of devices that accessed the YouTube livestream or post, but not the actual number of people who may have been watching—whether that was the one person who accessed it or a group of people who watched through that one device. It also doesn't indicate how long the person or people watched, nor what they might have been doing while they were watching—attentively engaged or simply playing it in the background while doing other things. Online attendance record-keeping hasn't continued.

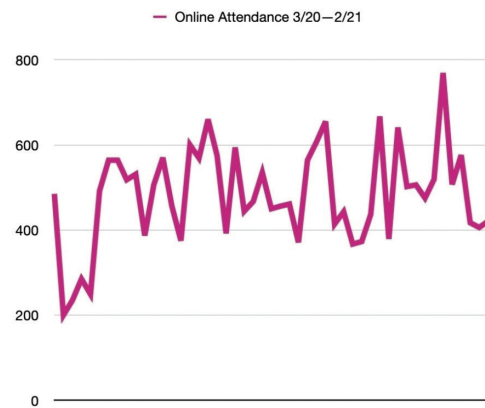


Figure 4. Carmichael SDA Church Online Attendance 3/20-2/21 (Carmichael Church data set retrieved April 19, 2022).

With the lockdown and decreased attendance, most programs ceased except for the church service. Some Sabbath Schools started Zoom sessions. When the quarantine ended, the start of attendance necessitated that children's Sabbath School divisions merge due to fewer leaders and

fewer children than pre-pandemic levels. As attendance increased, the number of leaders hasn't kept pace.

PUSHED OUT OF A RUT

A large church needs systems, which often results in familiar ruts. Change becomes increasingly difficult, and many prefer things this way—especially those in charge and those supporting the system with their resources. Sacred cows are, by description, sacred. But something like a pandemic moves them to the slaughterhouse. That can result in painful loss, but also a new opportunity, improved efficiency, new investment, and increased meaning.

Because churches in the Sacramento area closed, as did all places of public gatherings, those present to produce online content fed off each other without naysayers interrupting their parade of ideas and implementation. Instead of well-established ruts for a worship service, the *tabula rasa* enabled much more creativity than others would typically expect or allow. Artists took their palates and created, no longer limited by the walls of the sanctuary. They also enjoyed the luxury of being able to edit before airing.

The limited feedback tended toward the positive direction. The expected drop in offerings didn't occur; in fact, offerings increased when nobody attended in person. Electronic giving, which previously had limited participation, increased dramatically. Church leaders marveled, yet expected the bottom would drop any moment.

Experimentation increased. The long announcement period to start worship fell by the wayside because there was nothing to announce and no one present to hear it or pine for it. The aging choir couldn't gather and certainly couldn't sing as a group, so new music and new ways of producing it replaced the standard fare that would have competed with it had the rut continued. Pathfinders carried on, meeting outdoors rather than indoors, which seemed to make sense for Pathfinders. Youth leaders started weekly Zoom meetings with full attendance since no one had to drive to a central location. The leadership team sought fellowship, bonding, and the challenge of ministering to other youth through a Zoom experience that wasn't the same as school.

Carmichael SDA Church members tend to be busy; often too busy. Those with children at the nearby SDA school frequently have a long commute. School activities can include academics, sports, music, and more, with travel and programs and spiritual retreats. Church often gets

the leftovers, especially during the teen years. Collegiate and young adult participation in past years surged based on leadership and the current wave of interest. During the COVID-19 pandemic, parishioners found themselves "less busy" and seemed to appreciate it once they became accustomed to being with themselves. Families spent more time together as a family. While some expressed appreciation for that, one wonders if they will return to an overly active schedule when the pandemic eases.

Will the benefits that came to the church during this seemingly long pandemic get washed away when things return to "normal," or will families and individuals maintain a different lifestyle they finally experienced because of the pandemic?

FRICITION

After the initial alarm and lockdown, the question became how long until things would return to normal. The pastoral staff at the Carmichael Church followed the government regulations, even though these changed sporadically as new data emerged. Medical scientists and politicians didn't always agree nationally or locally. When the California state governor shifted from state-wide mandates to county decision-making, the Northern California Conference followed suit by not giving local churches direction beyond abiding by county health requirements and advice in their respective counties. The Carmichael Church sits near the border of Sacramento county and two other counties. But those who attend come from at least three different counties, including rural ones with a lower population density and a higher spirit of independence.

While in lockdown, no underground movement for meeting in person secretly emerged. Those desirous of meeting in person could choose SDA churches in the adjacent rural counties that did meet in person while the Sacramento country forbade it. Online services provided a worship experience, although remote—somewhat like everything else at the time. Following the lockdown, questions of mask or no mask, social distance or closer proximity, contact tracing or not, temperature-taking or not developed. Church leadership, viewing this as a public health issue and not a religious liberty issue, communicated community compliance for those who attended. Church greeters welcomed those arriving, wearing a mask, recording contact tracing information, and providing a table with hand sanitizer and free masks. While nobody policed attendees after they passed the greeters, people didn't challenge the

norm. Pew markers indicated which pews to leave empty. Attendance remained low enough to comply easily. The majority who previously attended stayed away, either because of the pandemic or as a statement opposing the safety precautions taken.

Following a year that included two lockdowns and the persistence of the pandemic with variants, the arrival of vaccines repeated the growing division. As in many places throughout the country, those denying the virus, including scientific and government data (Gupta 2021), typically identified with the anti-vaccine group. Those concerned about the virus generally got vaccinated as soon as their age group could. Over time, pressure built to relax protocols. Jonathan Haight, author of *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, used the metaphor of a rider on an elephant. We use our rational mind as the rider who claims control, although our immediate and irrational impulses take the form of the unstoppable elephant. Those who argue get run over. Those who connect relationally have a better chance of being heard.

In the summer of 2021, plans to remodel the sanctuary interior went into effect as previously determined. Church services continued outside with the purchase and erection of a large tent on a grassy area on the church property. This challenged social distancing practices as worshipers brought lawn chairs and children ran playfully in this setting. In this outdoor environment, younger families felt safer with their young children who couldn't be vaccinated. Older people feared the uneven topography and stayed home to watch online. Some who previously worshiped indoors stopped attending, while others who previously stayed home began to attend. The visible congregation who gathered changed in some ways.

With more than a dozen SDA churches in the Sacramento area, including those in adjacent counties with less constrictive guidelines, Adventists could choose their church attendance based on COVID-19 protocols rather than previous participation. And they did. This may have prevented deeper friction that other congregations in the community faced.

THE NEW OPPORTUNITY

One of the big questions many leaders asked during the lockdown period of the pandemic was, "How do I not let this pandemic go to waste?" The leadership team at Carmichael asked this question regularly. What things need

to change, and is this a good opportunity for us to change them? Sacred cows got melted down and repurposed. Thoughts of "What church could be..." and the church leader's role in this began to percolate.

We all knew that programming wasn't the answer, yet it was hard to stop programs. Even during the pandemic, our services often became just another program. Programming isn't the problem, but the pandemic helped us reprioritize discipleship and the community connection impact of all of our programs. Here are a couple of examples of how programs changed.

Midway through the pandemic, we restarted the Natural Church Development (NCD) process. Surprisingly, we found that the streaming/YouTube worship service that church members had affirmed registered as our lowest spiritual factor according to the people surveyed. The pastoral team who had invested so much in this weekly service felt a gut punch. On the other hand, it showed us how easily a multi-staff church can rely on the paid staff to plan and make decisions for the worship services, sometimes without asking the question, "What does my congregation want or need?" Because of the NCD survey results, our pastors, with a committee of other church members, felt empowered to significantly change our worship services—making them more personal and spiritual.

Instead of beginning the worship service with the customary welcome and announcements, we replaced them with a call to meditation and worship. Our multiple screens provide personal spiritual prompts for the congregation, with lights dimmed to create a more conducive atmosphere to encounter God's presence. While initial reactions seem positive, it remains a work in progress.

Like many churches, the Carmichael Church remains highly pastor-driven. With a staff of five pastors, each pastor drives their vision in their respective domains, recruiting those who affirm that vision. Church members with a professional orientation rely on the pastors to be the professionals at church, not considering that the church remains a volunteer gathering of those who follow Jesus, not simply a pastor. The pandemic revealed that pastors function as leaders only if people follow. Joining a Zoom meeting gave a new reference point for who followed and who didn't.

Through our decades in youth ministry, it has become clear that young people want to know who among their

friends will show up. That matters more than the program or the leader. Because of our quarantine into the Zoom world, we have a renewed focus to help students connect to other students, and then connect to Jesus. Instead of measuring ministry by the number who click on a Zoom link, this might be the time to empower others to minister in their own spheres. Research by Susan Mettes and Barna (2021) showed that Christians felt less lonely than non-Christians, and that practicing Christians felt less lonely than non-practicing Christians.

Carey Neuhoff tweeted the question, “Is Church attendance decentralizing rather than decreasing?” (@cnieuwhof 4/26/22). Thom Rainer predicted that worship service gatherings will be smaller after the pandemic quarantine, multi-sites and multi-times will replace the big church service, and only outwardly focused churches will survive (Rainer 2020).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Carmichael SDA Church continues this unprecedented journey through a pandemic and beyond. The recommendations for this congregation at this time include:

1. Forge a new identity. Instead of succumbing to the temptation to “go back to the good ol’ days,” discover a new identity for this church. The membership of 2,000 seems comical rather than accurate. Release the past and embrace the present and future. We are not the largest church in the conference. We’re a mid-sized church with the opportunity for growth coming out of a devastating pandemic.
2. Intentionally foster relationships and networks. The pandemic exposed this lack. Start with what exists as the core group. Identify or develop networks organically and organizationally. Challenge people to make Jesus the vital commonality rather than merely other shared interests. Track the relational networks, updating and revising periodically. Minister from this core group outward in concentric circles.
3. Make a paradigm shift in church programming. Change the pastoral staff focus from programming to spiritual growth, empowering others in the church to lead the programming. Reframe the role of elders to be spiritually growing and

responsive, following the lead and as an extension of the pastoral staff. Grapple with discipleship as age/stage-expectant and intergenerationally beneficial. Use this to shape and then evaluate what those who lead the programs do for the church’s ministry.

4. Prioritize the church’s target groups. Make the in-person attendees a priority over online attendees. This doesn’t imply neglecting an online presence, but prioritizing those in the physical space. Start with those most connected, then lead them to connect with those labeled not “Nones” or “Dones” but now labeled “Umms”—those with a commitment to Jesus but not active in a congregation since the pandemic hit. This includes those disoriented, demotivated, discouraged, or disembodied (Moore 2022). Continue with the food bank clients and volunteers, groups that increased during the pandemic. After giving attention to these priorities, ask God what other target group(s) he has in mind for this church.

SUMMARY

The Carmichael SDA Church stood poised for a great thrust when the pandemic hit in the Spring of 2020. The ensuing lockdown halted just about everything. Online worship and Zoom access for other groupings kept it going, although most church members became spectators while a few whirled into a constant production mode. As the pandemic moves toward something more endemic, a return to pre-pandemic greatness must be laid at the altar, and a new mantle picked up because of the new realities.

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