

CHURCH SURVIVAL GUIDE

TEN STRATEGIES EVERY
CHURCH NEEDS TO
EMERGE SUCCESSFULLY
FROM COVID-19

By Dan Zimbardi

SANDALS CHURCH

ROGO
Foundation
REAL WITH OURSELVES, GOD & OTHERS

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PASTOR DAN ZIMBARDI HAS BEEN THE EXECUTIVE PASTOR OF SANDALS CHURCH, ONE OF THE LARGEST AND FASTEST-GROWING CHURCHES IN AMERICA, FOR THE PAST EIGHT AND A HALF YEARS. DAN SPENT TWENTY-TWO YEARS AS AN ENTREPRENEUR AND CORPORATE EXECUTIVE WHO HAS WORKED WITH SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST DYNAMIC BRANDS, INCLUDING GOOGLE, NIKE, FACEBOOK AND BURTON SNOWBOARDS. DAN'S PASSION IS TO TRAIN AND DEVELOP LEADERS BOTH IN MINISTRY AND THE MARKETPLACE TO DO THEIR LIFE'S BEST WORK.

Most churches are trying to figure out how to survive Covid-19. The combination of a global pandemic, economic crisis, civil unrest and a divisive election has turned the church world upside down. Broadly speaking, prior to all of the challenges of 2020, the Church struggled with existing in a post-Christian culture. Many pastors are out of touch with technology and how to reach upcoming generations. The president of the [Barna](#) Group recently [suggested](#) that one in five churches may permanently close in the next 18 months. With so many headwinds, it's not looking good. So, the question is: How can the church survive Covid-19?

I have created a resource that will help you lead yourself and your church out of this difficult season and into a season of growth. This resource is pulling from many of the best practices we have developed over the years at [Sandals Church](#) that have helped us become one of the fastest-growing [churches in America](#).

I hope that every time you see the word “plan” in this resource, you and your team will commit to writing out your detailed plan of what needs to be done, by who and when. Then, gather your team regularly to discuss progress on the plan and make any necessary adjustments.

**KEEP IN MIND THAT A
PLAN IS NOT A PLAN
IF IT'S NOT WRITTEN
DOWN.**

1. The Scoreboard Tells Us if We Have Won or Lost. So often, churches do not set goals for the year. My question to these churches, how do you know if you won or lost at the end of the year? How do you know if you've done a good job? Church leaders must move from feelings to facts. Instead of getting to the end of the year and saying, "I think I did a good job," or, "I feel like the church had a good year," you need to be able to say, "the church had a great year because we hit our three goals in discipleship, giving and community life." That's how you move from feelings to facts. I'd like to suggest the following goals for every church in 2021:

- a. Financial Goal - I like to set margin goals. Margin is the difference between your giving and expense budget vs. actual giving and expenses. If you have margin at the end of the year, you have money to invest back into the church and the staff.
- b. Connection Goal - connecting people into your discipleship pathway. Moving people from attending a weekend service to the next steps in your discipleship pathway is critical for every church. A simple goal for connections is to establish a target percent of your first-time guests who have taken the next step.
- c. Quality Goal - measuring the health of your volunteers, small groups/Sunday School. The best way to understand if your ministry is effective is to ask the people who are a part of the ministry. A simple survey that rates people's experience in your key ministry environments will tell you if your people are engaged and thriving or merely checking a box.
- d. Attendance Goals - in each of your key environments. I know attendance goals get a bad rap, but if your attendance on weekends, youth groups, small groups and kids ministry is declining, something needs to change. I suggest laying out your key ministry environments, establishing a baseline of attendance and setting monthly targets for each environment.
- e. Digital Goals - will help you and your team focus on ministry in the digital environment. If you are not doing ministry online, then your church simply won't make it. If you're doing ministry online, then you need to do more. Millennials and Gen Z do life online, and if you want to reach and disciple them, you must have a plan to do so. You can set a goal to have a certain ministry online by a certain date or set a goal to have X number of small groups meeting digitally. These are just a few examples, but I suggest having a goal or goals that will drive you and your team to focus on doing ministry in the online world.

2. **Develop a Giving and Expense Management Plan.** Churches that are doing well financially amid Covid-19 are doing well because they have a plan to do well financially. Every church should have a plan to increase giving and to manage or drive down expenses. If executed well, this plan will help you reach the financial margin call that was established in Point 1 of this resource.
- a. Giving - [Attached](#) is an example of a Giving Plan we put together several years ago to provide you with an idea of how to put a plan together. It's a pretty simple spreadsheet where you lay out the 12 months of the year across the top of the file, and down the left-hand side of the file, you list out key categories of people, ministries, etc. Then in each cell, you document what you are going to do that month and who will own getting it done.
 - b. Expense - If you do not have good visibility (reporting) of what you're spending each month, you will likely have no chance of effectively managing your church's expenses. There are so many ways to reduce expenses in a church. If you or someone on your team is not good with finances, then I suggest grabbing someone from the church and having them help you create a plan that lays out all of your initiatives to reduce your cost to run the church. Just because the church or a specific ministry has always done something doesn't mean you still should be doing that thing or ministry, especially if it is costly and does not help you reach the goals you have set for the year.



3. **Spend 2021 Developing the Agility Skill Set.** I like to define Agility this way; *Seeing and Delivering Change*. The world is changing faster than ever before, and churches are not keeping up; this is why so many churches are closing their doors. Now to be clear, I am not suggesting the Word of God changes, or our interpretation of it changes. Rather, what I am saying is *how* we do ministry must change. The agile church leader sees changes that need to happen in themselves, their staff and how they do ministry. Then they make that change happen. Being an agile church leader or pastor requires courage because the reality is church people do not like change! You can listen to a talk I gave on agility ([Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)) to help you develop this skill set. You can also listen to my talk on [Change Management](#) to help you lead your people successfully through change.
4. **Create a Self Care Plan** - There's a reason why flight attendants tell passengers to put on their oxygen mask before trying to help others around them. You can't help the people around you if you are not well. Often, pastors do not take care of themselves physically, spiritually and emotionally, which then leads to a crisis both at home and in the church. Every leader must have a [care plan](#) that includes daily, weekly, monthly and annual rhythms of rest and refueling. When I first started in vocational ministry, I found myself in a place of burnout by the end of the first year. I was burned out because I was not taking a sabbath each week and had no thought about refueling in the things of the Lord. The reality of that first year of ministry is that I wasn't as effective as I needed to be to lead others because I wasn't leading myself. I have attached [exercises](#) that Pastor Dan Crowley developed at Sandals Church that can be used on a regular basis as a foundation to your Self Care Plan.



- 5. Invest in Your Boat Rowers** - The people in your church who are rowing with you are the people who are bought into you and the church. You know if they are bought in not by their words but by their calendar and their checkbook. If they are giving of their time and finances, then they are rowing with you. I would encourage you to invest your human and financial resources back into the people who are shoulder to shoulder with you doing ministry. So often, churches spend the bulk of their time and money doing good out in the community while neglecting the people that keep the churches' doors open. Now I am not suggesting that you don't do outreach. You must reach, connect and care for your community. But you cannot care for those outside the church and neglect those inside the church. Part of investing in your boat rowers is giving them a vision that inspires them to invite their friends, family, and co-workers to church. Cast that vision in special gatherings where only your boat rowers are invited. They need to know that they are special and important to you. At these gatherings be sure to thank these people for their commitment and tie their contribution to the work of God at your church. If you invest well in this key group of people, their engagement level will increase, and they will become your best inviters.
- 6. Digi or Die** - If you do not have a vision and strategy to reach people and disciple them in a digital environment, then your church will be on a steady decline for years to come. Most people want to check out a church online before they will ever step foot into a building. Others will never go to a church building but will engage with the church in digital ways. The Church is so far behind in terms of using technology to connect with both the local, national and global community. There are billions of people online that don't know Jesus and they are just one click away from finding your church and the Gospel message if you are executing an effective digital ministry strategy. If you want to develop a digital ministry strategy and don't know where to start, I'd suggest connecting with [Tony Morgan](#) and his company called [Frontdoor](#). You can also check out [this presentation](#) that our team put together that articulates how we (Sandals Church) have been thinking about digital ministry.

- 7. Look for the Opportunity Amidst the Rubble** - About a month into the quarantine of 2020, God gave Pastor Matt Brown and me the word opportunity. God showed us that even through the challenges of 2020, there would be opportunities that we would have to work and look for if we were going to make something out of the mess that was 2020. And that's precisely what we did. We had dreamt of bringing the Sandals Church vision of authenticity to Orange County, CA. Recognizing that Covid-19 was making things even more difficult for churches, we started researching churches in OC and Los Angeles county that appeared to be struggling. We offered resources and any help that they may need to move their services online, including providing online kids ministry resources and use of our auditorium and staff to record services. Our intention was always and will continue to be coming alongside the local church. Our researchers identified six churches that were likely having a tough time. We reached out to each church to start a conversation about offering help with whatever they needed. From one of those conversations, a relationship was formed, and Sandals Church Anaheim was born. We looked for an opportunity amidst the rubble of Covid-19, and God showed us the opportunity he wanted us to pursue. What opportunities are you pursuing amidst the challenges that your church is facing?
- 8. Prioritize Friendship** - With so much to do to lead the church, a family, and care for yourself, it is often friendships that take a back seat in a pastor's life. Friends play a vital role in conveying a word from God that pastors often need to hear. Friends receive our confession. They pray for us and encourage us toward the things of the Lord. Every pastor needs a few very good, genuine friends that they can do life with. Ministry takes a toll on us. Friends pick us up, encourage us and make us laugh—especially when we haven't had much to laugh about. In a season like the one we have been in, we need to laugh and be reassured that we are not in this alone. Many pastors take surveys year after year and express deep isolation and loneliness. Friendship is the pathway out of loneliness and often depression. I want to encourage every pastor to make time for life-giving friendships. And not only make time but be proactive and pursue individuals that you enjoy spending time with. Where possible, look for these relationships outside your congregation. Every pastor needs to feel safe communicating the hardships of his life and ministry without fear that what's being communicated will get passed around the church. One final note, especially if you have had a hard time creating deep friendships. I have found that transparency is often the key to forging meaningful relationships. As you're spending time with someone that you feel safe with, I want to encourage you to go deep and be vulnerable. Being vulnerable builds trust, and trust is the foundation for all great relationships.

- 9. Get Real About You, Your Church and Your Relationships** - 2021 and beyond need to be a season of being real. So many pastors and church leaders are struggling. 2020 was the hardest year of ministry for almost every pastor I know. If you want not just to survive Covid-19 but thrive coming out of it, I want to encourage you to get real in three areas of your life:
- a. **Real With Self** - How is your walk and relationship with Jesus? Is he the Lord of your life or just the Lord of the words that come out of your mouth? You and your church will be stuck if you are not connected to the vine every day through bible study, prayer, living in community and exercising other spiritual disciplines. Here's my next question: Are you in the right role? So often, pastors love the idea of vocational ministry, but they don't have the wiring or passion for the work. If you lack the desire to go into work and lead your church, it's important to share that with your wife and closest circle who want God's best for you. Invite them into the process of seeking the Lord and what He has next for you. 2020 began a season of transition; maybe 2021 and beyond is a season of personal transition.
 - b. **Real About Your Church** - As part of the [ROGO Foundation](#), I've been working with struggling churches for years. So many of the churches I have spent time with simply cannot get real about their situation. Pastors, board members, and members believe that they are one small change away from a break-through. Ugh, this could not be further from the truth. I cannot tell you how many times I have heard things like "we just need a new name for the church," "a new sign would bring the people in," "if our pastor would teach more on _____," or, "if we remodel our building then we would start reaching our community." Most churches are struggling due to a lack of leadership, which drives an absence of people and a shortfall in finances. If your church is stuck, I want first to encourage you to watch [my conversation](#) with [Tony Morgan](#) from the [Unstuck Group](#) on Why Churches Get Stuck. Your church may also need to step back and pray into doing something really different, like merging with another church. You can [watch](#) our Executive Director of the ROGO Foundation, Ron McCoy, share what we have learned from all of the church mergers we have done and how God has moved powerfully through them.
 - c. **Real About Your Relationships at Home** - So often, we as pastors neglect the most important relationships in our life; our relationships with our wife and kids. The nature of a pastor is to care for the people in your church. If we were honest, it's hard enough to care for the people in our home, typically less than ten people. If it is hard to care for ten or fewer people, how can we care for hundreds

or thousands of people while making sure our family is getting the best of us? Pastors are often perceived as perfect (or near-perfect), and the truth is that's the furthest thing from the truth. What goes on in a pastor's home, including how the family relates to one another, is very similar to what goes on in the homes of the people in the congregation. As pastors, we just need to get real about this issue and get to work on improving our most important relationships. At Sandals Church, we say, over and over, "counseling is fine; in fact, it is good." Church leaders cannot ignore what's broken at home out of a fear of people in the congregation finding out. The truth is that it's good for people to find out that the pastor's relationships need work. One of the best investments my wife and I have ever made into our marriage, and family life was to spend time with Rich Plass at [Crosspoint Ministry](#). Rich is a pastor, [Enneagram](#) expert, and Soul Care expert. There are so many ways to improve your relationships at home, but it all starts with getting real about how they are doing.

- 10. Know Your Gifts, Use Your Gifts and Give the Rest Away** - To me, the best life is a life that is lived out based on knowing how God has made you, using the gifts He has given you, and empowering the people around you to do the rest. The man or woman who embraces this idea will live a full life that has the most significant impact on people and for the kingdom of God. Many churches stay small and very insider focused because the pastor is doing everything despite all of the gifts in that church sitting on the sideline. The truth is that pastors have one to two areas where they are really gifted. Everything else they do is because they need to get it done. What if the pastor knew what his gifts were, and the rest of the congregation did too. How much more effective would that church be at reaching their community if everyone was doing their part by using the gifts? There are many reasons why pastors do it all in so many churches, but perhaps the biggest reason is that the pastor has not gotten real about identifying his wheelhouse. It starts there. One more important thought: Your most talented leaders are your high potential, high capacity leaders who will substantially move your church's growth needle. These folks need a big bat to swing in your church. Let me explain. These leaders don't want to hand out bulletins; that's not what gets them out of bed in the morning. They are made to lead, drive change and achieve great things. They need to have a significant ministry assignment that will exercise their gifting and passions. If you identify these people, equip, empower and get out of their way, they will help your church thrive coming out of Covid-19.

I HOPE YOU FIND THESE TEN STRATEGIES HELPFUL.
WE LIVE IN CHALLENGING TIMES, BUT WITH

STRONG, PASSIONATE, HOLY SPIRIT DIRECTED LEADERSHIP,

THE LOCAL CHURCH CAN AND SHOULD THRIVE IN A POST-COVID-19 WORLD. I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT I AM WITH AND FOR YOU AND YOUR CHURCH. IF SANDALS CHURCH, THE ROGO FOUNDATION OR I CAN SERVE YOU IN ANY WAY AS YOU LEAD YOUR CHURCH THROUGH CHANGE, PLEASE DON'T HESITATE TO REACH OUT.

GOD BLESS YOU AND YOUR CHURCH!



Executive Pastor, Sandals Church

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