



# FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

**Relationships in the Time of COVID-19** by Kira Austin-Young



Shutterstock.com

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a dramatic effect on all of our relationships, both personal and professional. What are some of the new stressors affecting these relationships? How might they manifest in our interactions with each other? As people of faith, how can we respond to those in our lives with compassion and grace?

FaithLink is available by subscription via email ([subservices@abingdonpress.com](mailto:subservices@abingdonpress.com)) or by downloading it from the Web ([www.cokesbury.com/faithlink](http://www.cokesbury.com/faithlink)). Print in either color or black and white. Copyright © 2020 by Cokesbury. Please do not put FaithLink on your website for downloading.

## Socializing During a Pandemic

In the fourth century BCE, the Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote in his work the *Politics*, “Man is by nature a social animal.” The more recent work of psychologists and neuroscientists has proven Aristotle’s belief to be true. Alongside our physical need for food, water, and shelter, we also need to form relationships and belong to a group. Anthropologist Robin Dunbar’s work connects the size of our brains, compared to other animals, to the size of our social group. We are genetically wired for socialization, for working and being together. Thus, COVID-19 poses a particular challenge to us as humans. By socially distancing ourselves to reduce the spread of the novel coronavirus, we are going against our natural instincts and psychological needs.

So much of our culture is built around gathering together in large and small groups, at churches and concerts, in backyards and restaurants, all of which has been brought to a halt through lockdowns and shelter-in-place orders for the good of public health and to protect the most vulnerable members of society.

But even as we maintain physical distance from one another, many people are adapting and fostering social and emotional closeness via technology. Book clubs, happy hours, and game and movie nights have moved from homes and bars to Skype, Google Hangouts, Zoom, Twitch, or Facetime, to name a few outlets. We are worshiping and watching concerts together on Facebook Live and logging into Zoom for virtual coffee hours. Work conversations and meetings happen on Slack or

Microsoft Teams instead of in a conference room or by the proverbial water cooler. No longer limited by geographical proximity, it is just as easy to schedule time with long-distance friends and family as it is for those in the same city. And with the external demands on many people's schedules greatly reduced, it is less challenging to find time to virtually get together.

While technology may make social connection across distance easier, this time of intense social distancing is also promoting relationships with physically proximal neighbors. Now that we are home more often, and as warmer, spring weather approaches, conversations over fences and from front porches occur with more frequency. With gyms closed, walks and jogs around the neighborhood serve to burn energy while also getting some fresh air and nurturing connections with others who are out and about.

**REFLECT:**

- How have you maintained social connections during this time of physical distancing?
- What surprising or new connections have you made?

## Closer to Home

Though social media and technology have facilitated our relationships with those outside our homes, for the most part our primary relationships remain those within our own households. While we used to spend just a few waking hours with our partners and children, suddenly, we spend all of them together. In our confinement, home has now become a shared workplace, school, playground, concert venue, and movie theater. Balancing work life and domestic life, learning and play, childcare and the demands of running a household in a time already marked by stress, uncertainty, and grief can create friction even in normally well-functioning relationships. In troubled relationships, on the other hand, the pressure can exacerbate the cracks that already existed.

We are living through a moment of unprecedented, widespread communal stress. Community events,

athletic competitions, and trips of all kinds have been cancelled or indefinitely postponed. High levels of unemployment and a significant amount of financial uncertainty compound on top of our forced reckoning with our mortality and human frailty. In the face of a deadly pandemic, even people with privilege and stability are emotionally stressed and grieving the loss of normalcy. At the same time, we are without access to many of our support systems and coping mechanisms.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) are widely known and provide a useful framework for managing our emotions during this time. It should be noted, however, that movement among these stages is rarely linear, and any one day might bring an experience of a number of different stages. As we are all dealing with tough circumstances, we might find our emotional responses differ from those to whom we are closest. Being in a different stage of grief from a friend's, a spouse's, or a roommate's means the potential for conflict will grow. We might also find ourselves more likely to take out our negative emotions on those who are physically closest to us at this time. With this in mind, it is unsurprising, though still distressing, to learn that instances of child and partner abuse have escalated worldwide, according to the *New York Times*.

**REFLECT:**

- How have the different stages of grief manifested in your life and emotions during this time?
- In what ways can the church community provide support for victims of partner and child violence?

## Skills and Strategies for Coping

One of the unhelpful ways our stress often manifests is through comparison with others, particularly with the version they present on social media. For those whose jobs have gotten more demanding or complicated by working from home while also parenting, it may seem like everyone else is just relaxing and binge-watching Netflix. For those

who have lost jobs and are navigating the unemployment process, they may be envious of those working, while those working outside the home are themselves anxious about exposure to coronavirus. Even those who currently have an income are anxious about how long that might last, not to mention those who are dealing with health crises involving themselves or their loved ones. It is crucial to remember that this is a difficult situation for everyone and to extend grace and compassion to one another and to ourselves.

Handling these feelings may require more self-knowledge and self-awareness than we are used to, but being aware of when we are getting tense or annoyed and need a break can positively benefit all of our relationships. Strategies like communi-

cating our needs with one another, deep breathing, taking time for exercise, or simply spending time outdoors can help us constructively deal with difficult emotions. As Christians, setting aside time for prayer and reading Scripture, particularly the Psalms or the Prophets, can aid in situating ourselves within God's plan for the world. Scripture can also remind us that we are neither the first nor the last to suffer and that we are part of God's community across geographical and temporal bounds.

*REFLECT:*

- How has your faith or relationship with God helped you cope during this time?
- What are some of the upsides in your relationships of being quarantined?

## Core Bible Passages

In John 11:1-44, we see different reactions to grief within the same family after Lazarus' death. We know from other passages that Jesus is close to Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, who lived in Bethany and with whom he would often stay when he traveled to Jerusalem. Mary is identified as "the Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped his feet with her hair" (John 11:2), and we are told that "Jesus loved Martha, her sister, and Lazarus" (John 11:5).

After Lazarus dies, Martha is the first to confront Jesus, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died" (John 11:21), but she also verbalizes her hope in the resurrection. Mary stays inside the house until later, and her grief manifests in tears and physically falling at Jesus' feet. Both sisters demonstrate anger, bargaining, depression, and in Martha's case, some acceptance of Lazarus' death before Jesus raises him.

Times of uncertainty, stress, and grief can cause upheaval, but can also provide an opportunity for strengthening relationships. Ruth 1:1-18 tells the story of Naomi, who left her home in Judah with her husband and two sons to settle in Moab, only to have both her husband and sons die. When she decides to return home, Naomi's daughters-in-law insist on going with her. Orpah eventually leaves, but Ruth commits herself fully to Naomi, her people, and her God in the beautiful verses of Ruth 1:16-17.

*REFLECT:*

- How do these two passages show the ways in which grieving can both separate people and bring them together?
- In what ways does the hope in the resurrection that Martha verbalizes effect our emotional reactions to times of stress and uncertainty?

## When Loved Ones Won't Socially Distance

A major area of conflict in some relationships right now is centered around how different people interpret and bend the rules when it comes to social distancing. As a matter of public health, policing one another's

adherence (or lack thereof) to social distancing shows up in our relationships. Many adult children have found themselves frustrated by their older parents' insistence on attending a book club or dropping by a friend's house. Neighbors watch judgmentally as cars gather in front of a house on their block. Individuals struggle with how to tell their roommate that a significant other can't come over to visit anymore. Furthermore, social media enables us to discern that some people aren't exactly adhering to the rules of social distancing.

Underlying many of these exchanges is fear, especially when those playing fast and loose with the rules are in populations vulnerable to COVID-19. No one wants to prematurely bury their parent or grandparent. With some cases being asymptomatic, the situation of unknowingly spreading the virus with potentially fatal results is horrifying. Some of the negative mental health effects of isolation have led people to stretch the definition of "essential" travel and business, at the risk of unnecessarily exposing themselves and their housemates. It can also be frustrating for the rule-followers to see others flouting guidelines, knowing that the spread of the pandemic affects us all.

*REFLECT:*

- Have you dealt with any conflict with friends or family members about what is necessary under social distancing protocols?
- During this time, have you noticed yourself policing, judging, or wondering about others' obedience to strict social distancing? How have you justified your own occasional bending of the rules?

## United Methodist Perspective

The United Methodist Social Principles speak of community as "provid[ing] the potential for nurturing human beings into the fullness of their humanity. We believe we have a responsibility to innovate, sponsor, and evaluate new forms of community that will encourage development of the fullest potential in individuals." Social distancing protocols and government Safer-at-Home orders have massively affected the normal functioning of local churches both large and small. In turn, they have led to the very innovation of new forms of community that the Social Principles mention. While many churches have been able to transition to worshipping online quickly, many rural churches and those with older or poorer members who do not have high-speed internet access have had to get creative. Mailing booklets to help congregants pray at home, "drive-in church," and services via conference call are some ways pastors have cultivated a continued relationship with God and the church during this time.

As intergenerational organizations, churches are uniquely positioned to provide care and community to those most vulnerable to the severe symptoms of coronavirus. In many congregations, younger and healthier individuals are offering to do grocery shopping and other essential errands for more vulnerable people so that they don't risk exposure. Congregations have also deployed pastoral care teams and groups to check in on one another for any needs and to provide both conversation and a social outlet, especially for those who might be more isolated.

*REFLECT:*

- How has your community organized either formally or informally to support relationships within the congregation?
- Under social distancing, what might "innovating, sponsoring, and evaluating" new forms of community look like? What might we keep once we are able to be together again?



## Helpful Links

- This podcast with relationship expert and therapist Esther Perel gives some helpful tips for navigating relationships during a pandemic: <https://slate.com/podcasts/political-gabfest/2020/04/this-crisis-will-heighten-the-fault-lines-in-our-relationships>
- An article from *The Atlantic* on maintaining a relationship during quarantine: <http://tiny.cc/pv4onz>

## About the Writer

*Kira Austin-Young is an ordained priest in the Episcopal Church and serves as priest-in-charge of St. Ann's Episcopal Church in Nashville, Tennessee.*

Next Week in **FaithLink**  
Connecting Faith and Life

### Creativity in a Pandemic

by Jill M. Johnson

During this pandemic, people across the globe have used the time to express themselves in new and creative ways. How have people been creative during this time? How do creative expressions help us cope with difficult situations? How can we express our faith and hope through creative outlets?



Follow us on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/106609035052/> or at <https://www.facebook.com/faithlinkconnectingfaithandlife>.

FAITHLINK: CONNECTING FAITH AND LIFE is a weekly, topical study and an official resource for The United Methodist Church approved by Discipleship Ministries and published weekly by Cokesbury, The United Methodist Publishing House, 2222 Rosa L. Parks Blvd., Nashville, TN 37228. Scripture quotations in this publication, unless otherwise indicated, are from the Common English Bible, copyrighted © 2011 Common English Bible, and are used by permission.

**Permission is granted to photocopy this resource for use in FAITHLINK study groups.** All Web addresses were correct and operational at the time of publication. Email **comments** to FAITHLINK at [faithlinkgroup@umpublishing.org](mailto:faithlinkgroup@umpublishing.org). For **email problems**, send email to [Cokes\\_Serv@umpublishing.org](mailto:Cokes_Serv@umpublishing.org).

To **order**, call 800-672-1789, or visit our website at [www.cokesbury.com/faithlink](http://www.cokesbury.com/faithlink).

## Opening Prayer

God of peace, you have taught us through your death and resurrection that we will be saved. During these trying times, let your quietness and confidence be our strength. Through the might of your Spirit, lift us up. We pray to you and ask you for your presence so that we have the ability to slow down, be still, and know that you are God. We hold fast to you during these trials and through Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray. Amen.

## Leader Helps

- Open the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.
- Have several Bibles on hand and a markerboard and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions.
- Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to honor these differences by treating one another with respect as you explore this topic together.
- Read or review highlights of each section of this issue. Use the *REFLECT* questions in order to stimulate discussion.
- Open the session by inviting everyone to openly and honestly share how their relationships have been affected by social distancing in the past several weeks. Ask participants not to comment or offer advice, but to simply listen as people share one at a time.
- Close the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.

## Teaching Alternatives

- Hear from different people in your congregation or in your broader community dealing with different life circumstances (living alone, with young kids, caring for elderly family members, etc.). Ask them what has been difficult during this time and what they have relied on for support.
- Take this opportunity to learn about a new app, device, or social media platform and how to use it together. Some suggestions might be Discord, Twitch, Grandpad, House Party, or Marco Polo. Who might these platforms and devices help? What are some of their pros and cons?

## Closing Prayer

God, you have made us in your own image and redeemed us through the life and sacrifice of Jesus, your Son. Look on all of us in your creation with compassion. Help us to abandon the arrogance and hatred that infect our hearts and support us as we work to break down the walls that separate us. Unite us in the bonds of your love and aid us as we work through our struggles and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth. Remind us that in your good time, all nations and races will serve you in harmony and gather around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.