

# Church after Corona

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## Too early to predict

In many ways it is still far too early to predict how the Coronavirus pandemic will impact the churches in Australia or elsewhere. At the point of writing these thoughts<sup>1</sup> we are only just starting to emerge from the lockdown, and most churches have not recommenced public worship, although some small attempts to recommence face-to-face gatherings in small groups are being made as permissible group sizes increase.

Will people return to public church services after a prolonged period of worshipping from home (or not at all)? How will the ongoing uncertainty around the virus and possibility of infection affect the confidence of people to return to larger gatherings? How will the older, more vulnerable demographic that makes up a substantial part of our church attendees, react? How will the possibility that public communal singing might be off the menu for a while because of the much increased risk of transmission affect our services?

I have over the last few weeks, like many people, observed, listened, read, watched and participated in various discussions around the topic of the future of the church and post-pandemic society. I don't believe that anyone has a clear vision yet how this may pan out and we will need to be continually engaged as churches, leaders, and communities in this discussion and adjust our responses to local circumstances. I also don't think that there is any clear vision yet of the medium and long-term economic and social fallout of this event, which will also have a major impact on our churches. While there is a lot of uncertainty and fear in wider society, and as Christians we have a hopeful message to speak into that space, as well as call to watch out for social justice and care for those adversely affected, I am not convinced that we will see a large-scale turn (or return) of people to Christian communities. Here is why:

## Secularisation continues

Recent surveys and census data point to a strong decrease of the importance that religion/faith plays in the lives of many people in Australian society. [In the last Australian census](#) taken in 2016, 52% of Australians, a number that has probably further decreased since, identify as Christian with 30% identifying as non-religious, a group that had increased from 19% in the 2011 census.

[A 2018 NCLS survey](#) found that 35% of the population identified as neither religious nor spiritual. At the school where I work a recent wellbeing survey saw well over 50% of students indicate that spirituality or faith were not important to them (in spite of about 63% of families self-identifying as Christian during enrolment). I think this reflects the community around us and certainly fits the trends observed by various social researchers.

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<sup>1</sup> 8 June 2020.

Finally, the Australia Talks National Survey 2019, reported that out of eight choices to a question on identity ('*How important would you say each of the following are to your sense of who you are?*'), [religious belief played the least important role](#), being far eclipsed by political belief, nationality and gender, but also by job, language, sexual orientation and ethnicity.

Much has been written about the increasing secularisation of Western societies, and these statistics are just markers of the trend. Religion, faith and even spirituality appear to play a lesser role in people's lives than these things once did. Add to that the ongoing trend to distrust institutions, the continuing fallout from the inquiries into abuse suffered by some at the hands of churches and other institutions, and the size of the challenge before us becomes clear.

### **Outside the public consciousness**

When the Black Death stalked communities around Europe in the Middle Ages, the churches and monasteries were at the forefront of the response—offering spiritual guidance, including public services of repentance and prayer, publicly speaking into the situation, helping making sense and offering hope, and providing practical care for the sick and dying.

While churches are still offering spiritual guidance and words of hope today, this tends to be more focussed within their own communities/tribes. It was interesting to note how quickly most churches around the world were very willing to comply with orders to suspend public gatherings, recognising the ethical necessity for the protection of the wider population. But does this not also point to the fact that churches are clearly not seen as essential services. Furthermore, churches appear to be overlooked in the re-opening plans—for example a recent article in *The Australian* noted that the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney had to push Gladys Berejiklian before churches were even (begrudgingly, the author noted) considered in the measures to ease the lockdown.

In an article in the June edition of the German theological magazine *Zeitzeichen*, Ulrich Körtner, Professor for Systematic Theology at Vienna University, noted how the [churches had been largely sidelined during the pandemic and did not feature strongly in public consciousness](#). And that was in Europe and particularly Germany, where the Lutheran and Catholic churches have traditionally enjoyed a strong public presence and role. This is the practical reality of the statistics quoted earlier. Many Western people, especially the younger generations, live with a materialistic-scientific worldview that has little space for God and the church.

However, that does not mean that they do not have the basic spiritual needs of connectedness, of love, of meaning in their lives. But it appears they by and large do not look to the churches for fulfilling those needs. I am not hopeful that the pandemic has significantly changed this.

### **Rethinking values**

However, the pandemic appears to have brought with it some rethinking of values and life-style for significant portions of the population. Many re-discovered the value of family and appreciated a slower pace of life. [A McCrindle survey](#) even found that 26% of

respondents used the lockdown period to ‘*spend more time praying or in spiritual pursuits.*’ So, all is not lost!

Working from home has been both a challenge and a blessing, and incidental evidence suggests that a significant number of people appreciated the absence of the daily commute, the greater freedom to organise their life, and more time for exercise. I suspect that working from home for at least part of the time is a trend that is here to stay. It has been reported that the impact on productivity has been minimal, even positive.

### **Adoption of technology**

As people enjoy being at home more, how might that impact attendance at churches?

A recent ABC TV news screened an interview with an elderly Sydney resident who really enjoyed receiving her church services at home on her phone and expressed the hope that her Catholic parish would continue to provide this service, especially as she grows older and less able to attend in person.

While there are people who have been excluded from active participation in church due to lack of access to hardware or internet connections (something that has also negatively impacted some educational communities), it appears many people have successfully learned new technical skills and transitioned to a new, digital way of participating in or connecting with church.

Some parishes have reported increased attendances, and this is certainly borne out in my own experience at St Peters congregation, Indooroopilly, where people from Adelaide, Stanthorpe and other far-flung places connect with our Zoom services far more regularly than they would otherwise have been able to. The Chinese congregation who worships here reports attendees from Hong Kong to Melbourne and Auckland, a far greater number than they would normally reach. And friends in country congregations have also reported increased attendance, as people who might normally have to travel long distances to church are able to tune in every Sunday from the comfort of their lounge room.

### **Zoom or YouTube?**

I have experienced mainly Zoom church, which is live and offers a sense of community with others, even though you are not in the same physical space. The use of chatrooms further enhanced the community connection. However, Zoom is a closed group, and this militates against the public and open nature of divine worship. Of course, this can be in part overcome by recording the service and then sharing it on another platform like YouTube or Facebook.

Other churches seem to have gone the way of recording their services and placing them on a platform such as those mentioned for people to access when and how they wish. It gives far greater flexibility—you can go for a surf in the morning or feed the cattle and then watch the service—but it also feels less ‘live’ and less connected to others. I also believe that this potentially furthers a consumerist attitude toward church and could militate against a key object of church—being part of a community, giving of yourself to others in the presence of Christ.

Of course, placing your service on a public platform increases your potential audience exponentially and I have heard from friends who suddenly find they are reaching 1000s instead of dozens with their service. The question arises, how you can effectively minister to those people. Furthermore, data analytics suggest that people often do not stay for the whole service but tend to tune in more for the message and leave during singing and liturgical parts.

How will all this work out as we come out of lockdown and gradually return to a more open life-style?

### **Looking forward**

Again, it is too soon to say, but here are a few thoughts to consider.

- 1) Church, Ekklesia, is about community, about gathering, coming together publicly and openly. While there may be some reluctance to gather at this point, in the long run, as 'social animals,' we will seek each other out—face-to-face contact, human touch, shared experience is powerful and important. Certainly, the re-opening of schools showed that the students were generally very happy to come together again, even those who thrived in at-home learning. So, I am confident we will come together again in physical spaces and at set times and praise God and receive his comfort and blessing through Word proclaimed and sacrament shared. For a while there may be limitations on those settings, but nonetheless the physical gathering will continue to be important. As an aside, I have become convinced that the LCA/NZ's decision to discourage remote Holy Communion was the right one, as this meal expresses in a very real way community and belongs to a community in place and time—and in a way calls us back together.
- 2) I believe there will be more variety in how church is presented. We will need to think through how we continue to engage with those far away and yet connected to our congregations and find ways to continue to provide online services, be it livestreamed or recorded. This will require extra work of pastors and involvement of other technically skilled people—maybe a new opportunity to express the priesthood of all believers. Perhaps some of this could be handled regionally, but the personal connection to a community and its pastor is something we shouldn't discount. The challenge is of course, how to provide pastoral care beyond the Sunday service to those spread-out parishioners. But it will be not an 'either/or' but 'both/and' world for virtual and real services.
- 3) Perhaps this experience can also help us re-think some sacred cows (or even slaughter them?) like our service times. Does it always have to be Sunday morning? Are there other times when people find it easier to connect with us in our place of worship? How might we facilitate this? The key here is to engage with your community, including those who may have come into your orbit through online church, listening and working together for solutions that suit your local context.
- 4) I am aware that many people have used this period of online church to sometimes sneak away from their home congregation and join another service, gaining new and different experiences. Some even joined a number of different worship services every Sunday! The temptation is to see this as competition—I'd prefer to think of this as an

opportunity to learn and grow. We need to find ways to gather the insights and experiences of our people and reflect on what new thing God might be calling our congregations to. As above, listening and working together is key.

- 5) Face-to-face meetings are overrated. In fact, Zoom is a great tool to facilitate meetings and give people more time at home (no travelling required). While any group or committee probably should come together face-to-face from time to time, many, even most, meetings can be done remotely—especially if participants regularly meet in other contexts, like at church. Another positive side-effect of Zoom meetings is that they can help people focus on the business at hand.
- 6) I have also heard of bible studies being offered very successfully this way (Zoom)—this can provide extra opportunities to engage with people and allow them to participate in things they otherwise might not have been able to (e.g. having to get babysitters, driving long distances, going out at night), so this is certainly something to be reflected on. Additionally, the possibility of screencasting can make these quite interesting (and you save the cost of a portable projector).
- 7) We have a powerful message to address the panic and anxiety of these uncertain times. This message is as important for those within our congregations as it is for those in the wider community. The question is how we can get this message to be heard.
  - Having an active, engaging online presence may provide a means of connecting with that wider community, who will not generally come to our services. Church noticeboards (of the large kind—an older media type but still powerful) could also play a role.
  - Responding to community needs and providing active care is another helpful way to connect. But it requires open ears, eyes and hearts to notice what is going on in your context. Can you build on the new neighbourhood connections people made during the lockdown?
  - What ways of connecting with the wider community and helping them hear and see our message, who we are, who our Lord is, have you experienced during this time? Build on it.
- 8) Many people have learned much about media during this time—how we present ourselves to the public, how we might prepare and lead services, how we preach, and how we engage people. One of my most important insights is that authenticity is more important than perfection. No need to compete with Hollywood. Let us not forget those lessons but build on them in all we do—often these are helpful whether church is online or face-to-face.

I have focussed here mostly on the possibilities the pandemic may provide for our churches. We are on a journey—as a church, as congregations, as individuals and as a society. Perhaps this ‘re-set’ has given us a chance to reflect on our ministry and how we can best connect with the journeys of our fellow travellers both within and outside the church. Recent ‘Black Lives Matter’ protests around the world have shown that people are passionate about justice. Before the pandemic the school strikes for climate also bore witness to an issue that concerns many. I believe that the Good News of Christ is relevant

in this space. The question we need to reflect on is how we as churches speak into these passions, how we can contribute to discussions in our society and speak and enact the message of God's love in a way that enables those outside out church groups to hear and see.

We don't know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future, is an old truism that applies here. So, just like our forefathers in the faith (think Luther and the printing press) we can step out boldly, using the tools and opportunities our Lord places before us to share His Good News, to model His love, to provide touchpoints with those around us and pointers to the greater reality all are invited into.

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