

What does the Coronavirus pandemic mean for using media to reach out to people?

Richard Fox

People didn't take long to respond to Messages of Hope¹ about the Coronavirus pandemic and the restrictions, including Karen.² Karen reached out about how stressed she was and unsure about how to cope. Karen shared how she was,

Stressed about leaving workplace and not receiving any payment, not being able to find another job.

We realised quickly that Messages of Hope would be even more relevant to people during a pandemic and the restrictions.

When the restriction began, I was overwhelmed. Lutheran Media was reaching out to millions of people with a message of hope already, and it seemed like we were well placed to help people through this crisis. Messages of Hope is broadcast on over 1,000 radio stations that include commercial radio stations, community radio stations and Christian radio stations. Messages of Hope is played in Australia, New Zealand and on radio stations across the world including India and South-East Asia. The programs are also translated by local people in other countries into their language and then produced by them to reach out into their countries. Through these and platforms like social media, Lutheran Media and Messages of Hope are reaching millions of people.

Media gives us a way to reach and connect with people without overwhelming them as dramatically as walking up to complete strangers on the street and starting a personal discussion with them. Media gives us a way to meet people where they are at and let them work out if, how and when they might engage and want to know more. Media helps us reach into their lives and hearts in a non-threatening way.

In the past, amongst the positive responses, we received negative and angry responses about sharing a Christian message on public media. But now we were overwhelmed by stressed people looking for hope. How were we going to keep up with the demand of our content and respond and refer people? All this being done while we were transitioning out of the office and recording studio and into our homes.

Our small team met and planned the content to be produced, the mechanisms to spread the content on more media outlets, and how to manage responses from people wanting to know more about the hope Jesus offers us. We had limited capacity to produce content,

¹ Cf. www.messagesofhope.org.au and www.messagesofhope.org.nz.

² The responses quoted in this article are from real people however we have changed their names to protect their privacy and confidentiality.

manage the media outlet connections and respond to so many people who were reaching out to know more about the hope we have in Jesus Christ. This all on top of a rapidly growing social media audience and website visits that were into the thousands. People were looking for something or someone outside of themselves. They were looking for God to save them but who was God for them?

We noticed that the Coronavirus pandemic became a common enemy and people were afraid and anxious. People were connecting with us who didn't know where to turn to and who were in need of hope and included high school students:

During Covid-19 and home schooling, I have been quite stressed with all the work that is given to me to finish in a week. I feel like if I don't finish my work or do well in school, my parents would be disappointed in me. Sometimes it just becomes too much to handle. I just don't know what to do, I can't cope with all of this. I don't want to upset my parents though because they expect so much, as in they think that I'm not stressed and that I am like a robot that doesn't get stressed. Even my teachers expect me to do great things and not fail. *Zoe*

The amount of high school students reaching out to us for hope during these times surprised us. It seemed that they didn't have a foundation or basis to make sense of what was happening and a way to live through a time like this.

Other people responding included Mary:

Thank you so much. Yesterday was a bad day. No-one wants to know me when I have cold-chest infection and I felt really down. My home helps aren't allowed near me because of the virus as well. Please pray for me.

People were anxious and afraid for their future. This was evident in the amount of job losses and the panic buying. They were stressed and searching for hope. What they used to rely on to help them through the day, week and year ahead, was now no longer reliable. So where were they going to find hope to cope?

After discovering Messages of Hope, people were looking to find out more about who Jesus was for them. They were looking to reconnect. We also saw this in our livestream ministry which we partner with St Michael's Lutheran Church in Hahndorf, South Australia, and with Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Toowoomba, Queensland. We saw huge increases in people watching the worship services. Families and people who were loosely connected to the church, maybe through a school, and people searching to find out about the Lutheran church had started watching the worship services online through websites, Livestream, YouTube and Facebook. From a few hundred that usually watched the worship services, the audience was now thousands of people. Not everyone had internet access, so the weekly worship DVD mailout quickly doubled in size, and negotiations with TV stations occurred.

Social media outreach grew quickly, and people seemed to forget about if it was a good or bad thing and simply used it to connect with people. There were many different social media activities such as posting your past holiday photos, nature photos and family photos. The pandemic seemed to give people an opportunity to share about themselves

without feeling like they would be judged, critiqued and put down. That still seemed to occur but was less often. It was like we realised that we were all in this together so let's help each other through this. The pandemic gave us all a common starting point and discussion topic. It helped us unite together and gave us a purpose to support each other through.

Through these different times, I saw people open up more than ever before. Congregations also opened up by coming up with creative ways to connect not only with their members but other people in their community. The congregational and personal geographic barriers seemed to break down too, and people were searching and finding different churches that they could engage with. The sharing of the gospel was now in a global context rather than our own back yard. People were seeing different expressions of Lutheran theology and growing and learning about who Jesus was for them to maybe take back into their local community. To see so many Christians and churches open their doors online to people was amazing and very encouraging. We can be tempted to believe that 'I' have the only true understanding of who God is, but Christ is a mystery, and to see different expressions engaging with and supporting each other was wonderful to witness. That the context of our Australian and New Zealand Lutheran churches was shared online too, meant that there was more relevant Lutheran content to engage with than only from countries like America. People have been searching online for Christian teaching for many years now and have been often limited to US-based content. It's great to see more Lutheran content from Australia and New Zealand that is available for people who have been looking for some time, and even more during these times. The pandemic has helped the church catch up to where people are at. Faith is a very personal topic for most people so having the opportunity to find out more in the privacy and anonymity of the internet was very helpful to them. For example, 99% of people comprehensively research a car online before actually buying a car. They want to be sure they are getting the right car for them. Faith, although not a commodity, is more personal and important to people than buying a car. So it makes sense that they would look online for a church and faith before committing to find out more in person.

For our Australian and New Zealand context, we witnessed a growth in interaction on Facebook and YouTube in particular. People had more time to watch a video or listen to a podcast than they had before and they were interested to watch our short videos and listen to the 15 minute Messages of Hope podcast on platforms such as iTunes and Spotify.

Media will only continue to grow in opportunities for us to reach out and engage people with the hope that we have. It will be more important than ever before to rely on bible verses like 1 Peter 3:15 in our use of media so that we may witness the hope we have in Jesus Christ and his saving love for us.

But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. (1 Peter 3:15 NIV)

Trusting in the presence of Jesus with us and sharing the hope we have in Him with gentleness and respect is a wonderful guide to life for us during these times.

Media will continue to give us opportunities to meet people where they are at and my prayer is that it is used to continue to break down barriers between us and give opportunities to love each other. Media gives us the opportunity to work collaboratively together and to share gospel content with each other and with each other's contacts and followers. Sharing across individuals, churches and departments can only help spread the good news of Jesus Christ.

This may mean that rather than surrendering to others the opportunities media gives us, we rather join with each other to take up the opportunities, to support each other, and together make more of a difference to more people than we ever thought possible or imagined.

Some of what people may see now that our doors are more open may not be what we want them to see. We may not always agree with each other or say the right thing. But if it gives us the opportunity to share that we are not saved by our own efforts but by the grace, mercy, love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ, then how wonderful that is. I pray that people will see the love of God as we interact graciously with each other. This is a vulnerable place as it opens us up and makes us lose control of the message. But what a wonderful opportunity to set the gospel free from our human control and see it make a difference in so many lives.

During these times I have witnessed our language we use to communicate the gospel shift to being more missional rather than conversations amongst our own. I don't mean dumbed down but communicated and illustrated without jargon words that don't make sense to people on the street and who are desperate for hope. As a result of this pandemic, I pray that this work continues and we share the gospel in mission language with each other for the ultimate benefit of those who are trying to understand who Jesus is for them. I pray that this approach will equip all Christians with a language and approach that witnesses the gospel of Jesus Christ and His saving love.

Due to the pandemic, people are more open to finding hope and are genuinely searching for the hope we have in Jesus Christ. They might not understand it or see all of its benefits, but what an opportunity to witness who Jesus is for us. There is also an opportunity for us all to reflect on who Jesus is for us and share the hope we have in Him and how that helps us make sense of this pandemic and gets us through today, and the week and year ahead.

A question I constantly ask myself is how can I help that person on their next step with Jesus? Not their final step, but their next step. That may mean listening to them or reading more about them. It may mean sharing an encouraging social media post with them, or a video, booklet or podcast. It may mean praying for them as I read their social media post, email, or message. People like Linda who struggle with fear and asked: 'Could I please have a free copy of the book [on] fear?'

The challenge and opportunity this pandemic and media give us is together reaching out and engaging people to take their next step on their journey with Jesus Christ. That may mean an introduction to your congregation, or it may mean offering personal encouragement.

As this pandemic continues, we are seeing people respond to topics not directly associated with the coronavirus, such as dementia. The coronavirus has seemed to open people up to personal topics and helped them realise that we can't do this alone and we are not alone.

As congregations begin to reopen and people return, there may be new people enquiring about you after seeing worship and information about you or other Lutheran churches online. Members may also return with new insights and ideas. I pray that we are open to the resulting conversations and prayerfully support each other in the capacity and roles we are in. During the past seven or so years of providing livestreamed worship services online and by DVD, I have witnessed people reconnecting and returning to their local church and not leaving their local church for the church online. This is where engaging through media and meeting in person combine. People may search and find hope in Jesus through media but are fed in communion with Jesus and each other in the body of Christ. And that includes with the local congregation and people who live in it. We are a sacramental church and the gift and interaction we have with God through these is eternally important.

Please continue to pray that the gospel of Jesus Christ reaches out to people and that their hearts and minds are open to his saving love and the hope we have in him.

Thank you, and God's peace in Christ Jesus be with you.

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³ Cf. www.lutheranmedia.org.au; www.happyland.com.au.