

Crisis—a time to pivot

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Whether an educational community or church congregation, Lutheran institutions who set themselves apart from 21st-century life, refusing to engage in the challenging realities of the here and now, whilst ignoring the necessity of future thinking, live in denial. They are caught in an old model of church and school, thinking that what they offer is unique and that those in need will simply come. How sad to be left behind, an Ichabod,¹ at a pivotal time in history when the world is in desperate need for God's redeeming love.

If Lutheran institutions are to remain beacons of hope for a world in crisis, then we must do more than open our doors and say, 'we love you'. Church, whatever its form, must become about active inclusion, true acceptance of difference, with unconditional positive regard (Christ-like love) actively at the centre of its mission. Sadly, many of our institutions are seen as ponds of social politics, tokenistic in their acceptance of difference, wanting it neatly packaged and able to be saved. For faith-based institutions (both schools and churches), to survive and potentially thrive, we need to remove social stigma, truly embrace religious, cultural, sexual and gender difference and move to a less hygienic model of church. We must accept that we live in a time where our common humanity is what draws us together and the hope of the church lies with our capacity to embrace this, as we accept that the great commission exists beyond the doors of consecrated buildings and institutions that bear the Lutheran name.

Crisis is a time for action, a time when innovation and creativity play and red tape is somewhat abandoned, as humanity seeks to preserve itself. It is an opportunity to find new ways to both sow seeds and harvest. The farm, a global society of people living either with fear or in denial of a world-wide pandemic that refuses to see human distinctiveness, gripping instead to its victim's common humanity. If Covid teaches us anything, it is that we are all unsanitary, we are all susceptible, and we are all broken. What a wonderful opportunity to do church, to reach out to those around us knowing that blessing comes when we recognise our brokenness, allowing space for God's spirit to move.

Accepting that we exist at a time of great technological advancement, educators have been mobilised to fully embrace the digital age, with 'techno-tooling' happening in a fraction of the time it would normally take to learn and implement new skills. The time of Covid is offering an opportunity to step boldly forward into a frontier many of our schools had previously only dipped their toes in. The skills and lessons learnt to enable remote education and spiritual and social support, are now being embedded in pedagogical practice permanently.

It has been a testing time in the educational sphere. Staff and parents have grappled with health directives and government decisions that have at times been in conflict with the rest of society. In our uncertainty and social disconnect, what has become obvious is

¹ Departed glory.

humanity's need for connection and the positive psychology offered through the gospel of Christ. Weary teachers, worried parents, students uncertain about their future, all crying out for love and assurance. In my educational context, sharing the gospel regularly, corporately and strategically, has become more important than ever before, as leadership desired to bring church and learning to individual households in a sustainable way. Our reach was greater than anticipated, as we uploaded messages of hope and encouragement, devotional materials and chapels to social media and learning platforms, broadcasting the gospel into our students' homes.

The current generation of technological natives have described their experience as having a 'front row seat to learning in the remote classroom',² many citing they felt like the teacher was engaging directly with them. This rang true for our time of devotion and chapel, as we found new ways of sharing God's grace and hope for the world. In a world isolated, technology was able to bring relationship and spiritual support to students and staff. Staff whilst on campus were separated, but craved community, so we were able to develop additional devotional time to encourage and strengthen the vocational bonds shared. Student leaders took the opportunity to record and speak messages of hope and encouragement into the student community, offering support and growing school culture.

I am doubtful technology will ever be able to fully replace the human need for connection and contact, but for many who are disaffected or in the case of Covid, isolated, technology provides a way to do church, engaging without threat or judgement as all members of the congregation/community share a front-row seat.

The inability to gather in chapels and churches has been a challenge for those of us who feel comfortable in those spiritual places. In the midst of this socially-distant time however, is a moment to pause and perhaps pivot, as we connect back to the roots of the early church. Perhaps we can move forward by glancing in the rear-view mirror, learning from the disciples and apostles, by taking the gospel of Jesus to the people, rather than expecting those who may be weary, fearful or feel unworthy to expose themselves on the doorstep of a place with unfamiliar rituals and rules of engagement.

To step back after crisis into spiritual life as normal, would show we have learnt nothing as a community of faith. While human diversity can be ignored by a virus, it cannot be ignored any further by schools or the church, who must strive to understand how to engage with and embrace the variety of needs that exist within our broader communities.

Whether sharing the gospel or teaching about molecular biology, we have the capacity now in our schools and churches to use a variety of digital platforms to share knowledge and facilitate discussion. We have the ability to teach and learn from almost anywhere in the world. Surely there is wisdom in this for our institutions, as we continue to wrestle with what church is in a 21st-century Covid world.

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² Student quote.