

The post-Covid church will see with its eyes opened

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Our congregation witnesses to a local rural community of low socio-economic status within South East Queensland through its outreach to families via our primary school, to the elderly via retirement living units, to people with a disability through lifestyle support and supported employment, and of course as the worshipping body of Christ. As such, we have obtained an emerging picture from the Covid-19 crisis with a wide field of view.

Our congregation acted quickly when faced with the impacts of risks from Covid-19 to ensure that our important work could continue. It was an outstanding response within a short period of time. Upon reflection, we now realise that our decisive and effective response was predominantly to ensure continuity of services to ourselves. In acting quickly to meet our own immediate needs, we had our eyes graciously opened by God to the needs of others in our midst. Furthermore, we saw that the changes we made for selfish reasons, could reach others. For example, the creation of an online ministry to enable church members to continue to meet and worship regularly was eagerly grasped by people whose plight we should have understood. Members who had been restricted in their ability to attend worship due to sickness, age, lack of mobility or work commitments could once again be involved. We had been blind to their needs and our opportunity to help. Furthermore, our congregation had recently been in vacancy and understood the difficulties that this brings. Subsequent to filling that vacancy we again became blind to the needs of other congregations in the same situation. However, our online ministry reminded us of their needs as they attended our services. God opened our eyes and we were able to openly welcome and include these brothers and sisters in Christ into active involvement within our worship services. Just as Paul challenged a Corinthian church (1 Cor 11) lost in its own selfish desires (1 Cor 11:20–22), God challenged us to ‘discern the body’ (v. 29) and see His members, His body, in our midst that we had excluded, just as the Corinthian church had excluded the most vulnerable. In our blindness we had excluded part of Christ’s body, something that cannot stand. In opening our eyes, God has called us to ensure that practices will change, focus will change, delivery will change. Our eyes have been opened. We can now examine ourselves as we meet (v. 28).

We also had our eyes opened to the perspective of society and what it sees as essential. In both closing down and opening up, society has clearly prioritised that which is essential for life and its economy. Notable examples include major employers, tourism, sports, parks, and even beauty and fashion. In this, acts of worship were not as prominent in communications as activities for recreation or economic benefit. This should not surprise the modern church. However, whilst worship was not deemed ‘essential’, care for the vulnerable certainly was. Schools remained open to serve not only the children they educate but working parents under pressure. Elderly received extra focus because of their heightened vulnerability. The extra care required by people with a disability was quickly

identified within the media. The need for increased care was recognised by the church, government and the community, the vulnerable groups requiring the care, but also by the care givers. The care givers (teachers, aged care staff, support workers, administration) were asked to respond and they did so admirably. The church played an important role in this as well. For those of faith, this response was borne out of seeing something more, something essential. Once again, it is in seeing Christ in others. Society is not blind to the needs of the weak, nor to the work of the church. However, whilst care is seen as essential, spirituality is not.

If society misses that which is the essential element of why we care, perhaps we run the risk of following blindly. Covid-19 may be opening our eyes to a growing blindness if our care ministries lose sight of Christ in their midst or if we lose sight of the importance of care ministries to our growing in Christ. Thankfully, scripture tells us that the answer to curing this blindness to the essential Christ may lie in the ministry itself. If we want to serve Christ we should serve others (Mt 25:31–46). If we want to know Christ we should feed the hungry (Isa 58:2–7). To come before Him we have been told to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with Him (Mic 6:8). The church should reinforce the essential nature of worship to society but should perhaps reflect on how it sees the importance of head and heart to the work of its hands lest it follow the same path. Our congregation, and the church more broadly, needs to continue encouraging active involvement of its members within care ministries for the sake of the body.

We have had our eyes opened. While some may struggle with this new perspective and the changes it requires, we cannot go back, we cannot close our eyes once more. Our position is somewhat akin to that of a man healed from blindness by Christ and the family struggling to explain his newfound vision (Jn 9). Covid-19 has been an extraordinary experience, and some may question how God could use such a time of pain to refocus His church. Our response is simply that we were blind, but now we see (v. 25). If we find resistance in the face of this newfound vision, we should be assured that it is truly the Son of Man speaking to us (v. 37). For to go back to old ways would be to pretend to remain blind, and this would only build guilt on our behalf now that our eyes are opened (v. 41). If worship and ministry are essential, they are essential for all and therefore we cannot stay as we were. These are hard words. But God has been gracious and gentle in opening our eyes, even during such a difficult time.

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