

The impact of Covid-19 on the mission of the church

Brett Kennett, David Schmidt and Stephen Schultz

On the day of the resurrection the disciples were together and behind closed doors out of fear when the risen Jesus came and stood among them (Jn 20:19).

On the day of Pentecost the disciples were together again (Acts 2:1–2). When the Holy Spirit came upon them they were spilled out from the house they were in to declare the wonders of God to the gathering crowd (Acts 2:5–11).

For 2,000 years the disciples of Jesus have gathered together to receive the ministry of the risen Lord and have been sent into the world by the Holy Spirit to engage in the mission of God.

For decades the Lutheran Church of Australia/New Zealand has been experiencing a decline in the numbers of those who have gathered together in worship. There also appears to have been a decline in mission activity in our church. It is as though we have been reverting to a situation where the remnant of believers are behind the closed doors of the church with a growing fear that the end might be near.

And then came the outbreak of Covid-19! Within weeks the doors of churches were closed to our own members, preventing them from gathering together for worship. Would this deal the fatal blow to the LCA/NZ?

Apparently not! Many pastors and congregations managed to engage with their people in creative ways in the online world. Some were dragged reluctantly into this space, worried that their lack of technological expertise might hinder their effectiveness.

But they adapted and they learned and they delivered in all sorts of different ways. We have heard stories of how more people have become involved—how the body of Christ has been mobilised in new and refreshing ways.

And amidst these blessings, many communities discovered something quite extraordinary. The doors of the church, that had been physically closed, were now open virtually to an even greater number of people. Praise the Lord!

Stories have been circulated about all kinds of people who have reconnected to the church at this time. For whatever reason they have not been willing to commit to attending a physical church building at a particular time on a Sunday morning. But they have connected with the various online versions of church.

Parents and grandparents who have mourned the absence of their children and grandchildren at church have rejoiced that they have now connected virtually. Some of these families have even gathered together in their homes for worship. And faith conversations have been reignited across the generations.

Those who walked away from the church years ago and those with social anxiety issues have been able to reconnect in a safe environment.

Those who feel guilt and shame as a result of relationship breakdowns or other issues in their lives, have welcomed the opportunity to receive messages of forgiveness and hope, when they may otherwise have kept away.

And yes, plenty of people who have struggled to fit church into their work-life balance as a priority, have been able to connect at a time and place that is convenient to them.

We may wish to make judgments about the legitimacy of some of these reasons why people are connecting to the online church rather than the physically gathered one. We may worry that the presence of church in the online world has the potential to create a consumerist brand of Christianity.

Valid concerns, to be sure.

But surely we have been presented with an opportunity as the church to open our doors and spill out into countless homes and lives with the gospel. The virtual opening of our doors during this Covid crisis has been received with open arms by our 'church' people and many others. It would be a tragedy if our return to 'normal' meant a closing of these doors again.

Covid-19 has generated new challenges for us as a church. But it has also opened up a world of possibilities and our people know this and are energised by it.

The mission directors are exploring ways we can effectively support engagement in this space as the LCA/NZ into the future. We are facilitating conversations across the church to learn from each other and to see how we can work together. We are excited that this is a grassroots, localised ministry where the people of God are collectively engaged in the challenge of serving faithfully and effectively in both the face-to-face and online world. This is the church at work today.

Let's explore ways to use this time to grow as disciples who gather (either physically or virtually) to receive the ministry of our risen Lord and are then sent into the world by the Holy Spirit to engage in the mission of God.

May the risen Jesus bless his church at this time!

Brett Kennett is Pastor for Congregational Support, Youth and Young Adult Ministry for the LCA Victoria-Tasmania District

David Schmidt is Director Ministry and Mission at LCA Queensland District

Stephen Schultz is Assistant Bishop for Mission for the LCA South Australia-Northern Territory District