

The church has left the building...

Valerie Kupke

On 22 March 2020, my local church held its last face-to-face worship service. On the same day, the planes stopped flying and state borders were closed. Some ten weeks later public worship within my congregation will resume. The physical space known as church will reopen. Between these two pandemic events much has changed: our vocabulary, our awareness of place, our consciousness of space, our understanding of neighbourhood as well as our sense of vulnerability and isolation.

Lockdowns, distancing requirements and space regulations have presented our church leaders, congregations, and parishes with huge challenges for a community built on gathering regularly as a collective, as a fellowship, as a body of believers, what Rowan Williams has called an '[historic spiritual moment](#)'. And to what end? Will the challenges they have met, the problems they have solved, the crisis they have survived result in a communal sigh of relief and a slow (and diligently staged) return to normality? What will the church post pandemic look like?

Around the world a number of church influencers are positive. [Nicky Gumbel](#) in London, [Carey Nieuwhof](#) in Toronto, [Philip Yancey](#) in Colorado, and [Brian Houston](#) in Sydney recognise a new church form which is more digital and less analogue with substantial online offerings, flatter leadership models, virtual and flexible staff teams, less emphasis on place and space and more on interaction and engagement. Nicky Gumbel has celebrated the openness of people online. The ease of connection and greater friendliness. People are comfortable, able to switch off, not stressed because of travel or babysitting worries.

The gains made in attracting online interest globally and locally should not be lost. People have had a peek inside their neighbourhood churches. And anonymously. [Tim Costello](#) suggests the sharing of the same global experience should reinforce the need for an outward looking church which 'doesn't exist for self-maintenance'. Others are more nuanced. [Denise Liersch](#) of the UCA suggests that so much of what we anticipate as a church going forward is contextual, reflecting our personal, local and national experiences of the crisis. [Tim Keller](#) in New York believes it is too soon to say. He has experienced the aftermath of 9/11 when, even in such circumstances, life and church and people eventually resumed their usual rhythms and patterns.

Recent research would suggest that the overwhelming majority within our congregations and parishes do recognise positive benefits from the pandemic. There has been increased connection between members, friends and family through a variety of means. People have been at home and contactable. Many have worked hard to maintain this connection and it has propelled the need for new skills, new attitudes, and new approaches. Another positive outcome. People have had time to re-evaluate what is important. And it is not what is in their wardrobe. Values around tolerance, children, gardens, friendships, collegiality, neighbours. Their spiritual lives have become more intentional, outward looking and creative. And they have had more time. Time for reflection, for re-evaluation,

for connection. It is hard to accept that these insights and responses will not have some influence on our church experience post pandemic.

Some people have been working very hard indeed and there may well be a need to pause and take a break. We don't want to lose, however, our creativity, the surprising quality of the online world, the simplicity of online meetings, the connection with many who now, and into the future, may work from home and be a new 'parish'. Mothers of young children, those working outside of 'normal' hours, those confined to home because of disability have relished the online church resources which they have shared with partners, friends and family. At odd times and in odd places. The message has got out. Somehow the gospel has escaped.

Yes, we will welcome a return to the physical. There is a spontaneity and a tone which the screen does not fully replicate. And yes, there are those without smart television, internet or mobiles, so what they know is what they miss.

I surveyed my friends. Some believe things will return to much the same as usual. Some wonder if people will return to church at all. Some look for a renewed awareness of value in people and in their opinions. Some are impassioned by the policies and turn of government. All had a response.

So perhaps the pandemic will not be just something we get over or get by. As a body of believers, we have not so much been in lockdown but have flared up. Opportunity and challenge are both on our doorstep. The church *has* left the building. And some are confident it will not go back.

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