

# Letting go of what we knew

**Benjamin Lyons**

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You need to know three facts about me: 1) I am the Youth Ministries Coach at Immanuel Lutheran Church Buderim; 2) I am an amateur home brewer; and 3) I am oddly passionate about the apocalypse.

When I first entered the youth context, I was handed a model of youth ministry. When Covid-19 happened, we had to throw it out the window. The Friday night centric model was abandoned by all over the course of two weeks. Many people around the world were calling Covid-19 the apocalypse. These were the dark days. In the midst of this, church leaders met, all over the country, socially distanced, to pray and worship and plan. The ministry I oversee, Immanuel Youth, settled on prioritising relationships and staying connected, as did most youth groups. The Baptists down the road would videoconference with their kids to connect; another group set up small groups to meet across the Sunshine Coast; and countless Instagram feeds were filled with devotions, challenges and encouragements crammed between home attempts at café breakfast favourites and nostalgic reposts of group photos. There was no right way to minister in the pandemic, only many good ways.

Enter fact 2: Those first weeks in March were like the brew day. Brew day is the most labour-intensive part of beer brewing, but there is a bigger job that still needs to be done. For most of a day the brewer extracts sugars from grain, boils in hops for flavour and preservation and cools the lot so yeast can be added, and fermentation begin. Social media plans were drafted, leaders rostered, small group chats created, and spreadsheets populated with names, contact details and birthdays for follow-ups and birthday cards. But then the frenzy subsided. We entered ‘fermenter time’. This is the crucial process which turns the mixture into beer. As an amateur brewer, fermenter time is an agonising wait to find out if the seeds planted will grow to yield a good crop. In fermenter time, control is handed over. Most of fermenter time is waiting. Most of Covid time has been waiting. Waiting to see what the Spirit is doing, waiting to see if faith has grown, waiting for answers to D&Ms (deep and meaningful) or just DMs (direct messages). In a hilarious providential coincidence, this year Immanuel Youth adopted a new vision statement: ‘To equip and empower our youthies [sic] in their discipleship with Christ.’ Now we just need to wait to see.

Congregations are waiting, too. A video was circulated which argued that church is not an event or a place, it is a community. This is not a new and revolutionary idea. The Augsburg Confession says, ‘...the church is, properly speaking, nothing else than the assembly of all believers and saints...’<sup>1</sup> This brings us to the third fact. We are in a true apocalypse—true in its Greek language sense. This time is a revelation, a revealing of secrets, a

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 42.

disclosure of truth or a peeling back of the curtain.<sup>2</sup> What does it mean to be a Christian? How is faith grown? Where is God? With worship centres closed, it is revealed to all believers that the answer cannot be the church building. Where do we encounter the living God? Through the Word; in prayer; through relationships; in encountering with the poor, the widowed, the alien and the orphaned; and ultimately in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our physical sacred space facilitates these divine touchpoints but must never monopolise them. This cessation of services has been a releasing of resources. Fermenter time cannot happen without separation. In fermenter time I have seen large groups of students seize the invitation to serve in our local soup kitchen; small groups have meet with renewed vigour; I've seen Zoom become loungeroom bible studies, prayer closets and home quarantine movie awards nights; youth have picked up bibles, devotional or prayer books and music to connect with their Creator; and when school returned, I was pestered by kids deprived of small groups. These responses would not have happened if we were not forced to let go of Friday night meetings.

Some parishes might be tempted to get back together as soon as possible out of fear that without the church event, people will have drifted away from God. I, however, wish to encourage churches to meet together in good time to celebrate the Spirit's work in their church over the past months and discern what our next collective season might look like.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> William F. Arndts and F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 91–92.

<sup>3</sup> This reflection has been somewhat inspired by Alan Roxburgh, Paul Weston and Martin Robinson, 2020. 'A Retrospective Church,' *Journal of Missional Practice*, Spring 2020, <http://journalofmissionalpractice.com/retrospective-church/>.