

Church at home: a reflection on congregational life during Covid-19

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During the last few months, we have all been witnesses to a country, a world, that has seen unprecedented change because of the Covid-19 pandemic. No part of our life has been unaffected. We watched our congregations move church life from a physical space to a virtual space within days. Without much warning, pastors found themselves leading worship in front of a camera in empty churches and researching online meeting platforms so meetings and faith formation activities could continue.

As we reflect on the impact of the pandemic, we are coming to the realisation that it will not be a short-term experience. Perhaps like me, you are wondering what the future world will look like. What will next year look like? How will congregations respond to this new environment? How will churches design worship, ministries and faith formation in this changed world?

As we begin to return to the new normal of church life following a period of 'lockdown', some of us have had a taste of a simpler life. We've been working from home, practising social distancing, and have had many regular events cancelled. We have enjoyed extra time with family, cooking together, walking together, and watching a new series on TV. We have engaged longer in times of play or experienced deeper conversations.

How are you feeling about returning to normal, resuming activities, weekend sport, visits to the gym, music or dance classes? What about returning to your church building for worship and congregational life? As leaders in ministry, are you overwhelmed by the complexities of preparing to welcome people back? What will the experience be like? Will it provide the joy that it did before, or will it be so different that we will experience a sense of loss all over again? The reality is, we are not returning to what it was like before. We would be wise to reflect on what we have learned from this experience. What have we learned about ourselves as leaders, about being the church in our location, and about the importance of being an intergenerational community? What have been the wonderful blessings from this time of Church at Home?

The present

Worship

In my congregation, I have enjoyed worshipping as one community. This may sound strange, as the reality is that I have physically been worshipping with my family at home. My home is just one of many locations where this worship experience has taken place. Through our congregation's Worship at Home videos I have experienced people of all ages and from both our worship service times come together in my home. They have prayed with and for me, they have led me in singing and proclaimed God's Word to me. I have been encouraged to talk together with the people in my household about faith and

about the Word of God for the day. Young people and older people have ministered to me. It has been a truly intergenerational experience. Could we continue this intergenerational involvement when we return to face-to-face worship? I hope so. Could we continue to come together using short video testimonies that are shared at both service times? I hope so. Could we share stories of what is happening beyond Sunday in our ministry activities across both services using video? I hope so. I hope that the strategy and energy we have put into bringing our homes together as one worshipping community continues when we meet face-to-face at two (or maybe more) different times and locations.

Small groups

Many small groups and ministries have continued to meet during this time: existing Small Groups, the Young Adults group, the Youth group, Confirmation, Bible Study groups, and Children's Ministry groups. These groups have provided a great way to stay connected during Covid-19, but I wonder if they have been places where deep conversations have taken place. Has this platform been a venue where new people have been welcomed or intergenerational connections made? I hope so. New groups have also emerged online. My congregation began a Sunday morning Coffee and Chat Zoom group to provide an after-worship fellowship opportunity. This has been a wonderful setting for intergenerational involvement and the sharing of how God has been working in the lives of the participants. It has been a wonderful witness to the faithfulness of God. People who did not really know each other before are sharing the joys and sorrows of this strange time. Again, it has brought together worshippers of all ages and across both worship times. Will this group continue? I hope so.

Children's ministry

I know of congregations who have continued to meet with their children's ministry online. The benefits of this have been the necessity to have parents involved. This has helped parents to build their confidence in sharing their faith with their children. It has also allowed other adult helpers to be involved, creating an intergenerational environment. One congregation shared how they encouraged a 'Bring a Grandparent to Sunday School' session via Zoom. This enabled grandparents to join in from all over the country! Could this way of doing children's ministry continue when we return to face-to-face ministry? I hope so.

Another innovation I have heard about is Children's Ministry in a Bag. Congregations present families with a bag of resources based on a theme and encourage the wondering and learning to take place with close family and friends.

Part of the 'both/and' strategy is partnering with parents. During Covid-19, worshipping at home has reminded us about the importance of creating space in our homes to worship God. Bringing God into our homes and lives. This isn't just a once-a-week experience but a way of life. Maybe your congregation has been helping to resource homes to do this. As we return, could our children's ministry be a parent/child session once a month that equips parents to teach the faith at home? This could be an online or face-to-face event to help parents see the important role they have to play in teaching their children and helps to equip them. Part of gathering each month would be to share stories and equip parents for the next month of learning together.

Pastoral care

My congregation have developed a new pastoral care ministry—Call Care. This builds on the foundation of an active pastoral care team, consisting of twenty members. In addition, a further sixty volunteers have been regularly calling one or two people, to connect with them to see how they are going, to listen to, pray with and for them. This has been positively received and has seen a multi-generational approach and in some cases intergenerational connections made. Will this continue beyond the Covid-19 lockdown? I hope so.

Mentoring

This time has provided a great opportunity for congregations to begin a mentoring program or build on intergenerational interactions that were already taking place. Many people have found themselves at home more hours each week because they've been working or studying at home, or because of cancelled activities. This is true also for many retired and over 70s. Could this time be used to connect in creative ways? I have encouraged congregations to consider building connections across ages by setting up pen pals, older adults paired with children to share stories via letters, drawings and notes of encouragement. In some cases this could grow into a regular phone call or video call. I hope that these relationships could continue beyond Covid-19, adding in a face-to-face dimension as well.

The future

I hope that the future ministry for our congregations is a case of 'both/and'—providing both opportunities for meeting and learning together online and in person, providing small groups for age appropriate learning and all-age groups.

It will be important to worship together face-to-face and resume our regular way of being community. The shared experiences and the incidental conversations and care that take place when we worship and meet in person cannot be replicated via a video, livestream or Zoom meeting. However, what these media platforms do provide is an opportunity for people who are searching to connect with the church, or for those who have slowly drifted away to reconnect. Watching a video can be like entering the church and remaining in the foyer, observing what is happening from a 'safe' distance. It also provides an opportunity for people to remain connected if they have work or family commitments that hinder their regular involvement. Online meeting platforms can also enable opportunities for single parents, those who travel for work, and those who prefer not to go out in the evening to still be involved.

As we move forward, we will need to acknowledge that we are not going back to normal. It is becoming increasingly clear that the Covid-19 pandemic is not just something we will get through in a few months. Instead, we are experiencing changes in our health, economic, and political arena that will bring change that is likely to affect our lives, society and churches for many years to come.

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