

# Reflections on a post-Covid-19 church: perspectives from Trinity Pasadena

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Trinity Pasadena is a large congregation located near the south-eastern foothills of Adelaide and is primarily both a multiethnic and intergenerational community. Multiethnic due to the main groups of people from European Australian, Indonesian, and Persian backgrounds, and intergenerational because of the spectrum of young families and children all the way to our elderly and retired members. All of these areas in our church have been affected by Covid-19 in a myriad of ways, and my experience of people from these different areas of the congregation has helped to inform a viewpoint of the work of the gospel and pastoral care to be done in a post-Covid-19 world.

If we look firstly at the multiethnic dimensions of our congregation: at the beginning of the year our church was on the cusp of meeting together to formally discuss unity and full membership of our Indonesian community as part of Trinity Pasadena—that is, until Covid-19 struck, and all that momentum was paused for the time being. Our leadership were very keen to maintain good emotional and spiritual bonds with our ethnic communities during this period, and being separated, especially from engaging in hospitality or cultural celebratory events, was especially hard. Online services, plus phone calls and visits have helped to keep the connections going, but a few things briefly shared here give some windows into the Covid-19 worlds of some of our ethnic communities.

Firstly, our Indonesian community have been worshipping together on Zoom and their members also participate in Trinity Pasadena's online services. However this time has also witnessed several Indonesian members having to leave Australia due to things such as their study being completed, and having the grief of going back into their home country that is far less safe in terms of Covid-19. A bonding and cleaving with us has occurred during their years here, and many of them say that their time here at Trinity Pasadena has given them special spiritual freedoms and ways of serving that they would not normally be given back in Indonesia.

Secondly, our small Persian community are a very close-knit group, many from refugee backgrounds, and had their own unique views about Covid-19. One of our members survived being gassed by Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq war, so he is ultra-cautious because of permanent lung damage lest he catch the virus. However in the last few weeks, the Persian 'hospitality and love engine' for welcoming people is still alive and well. When I arranged to visit a couple, they all invited many others (with social distancing) to come too, so that they could all make the most of the event and receive a communal blessing and prayer from their pastor.

In addition to these groups there is also the Trinity Place retirement village attached to the church. Here I have been doing weekly visits, small services and sessions with the residents in the serviced apartments, and we have been engaging in a song writing project

which explores their feelings and coping with Covid-19 restrictions and isolation. The residents composed the words and together we worked on setting the words to music. It has been a great success and we are working on recording it with the residents singing, but it shows the struggle within and the reliance on God for so much.

But one thing that has come out of that project, which is also echoed in many areas of the congregation whether it be in marriages, parenting or other areas of community life, is that deep down I think many people are not really ok. No matter how many times someone might put on a brave face or boast about having so much extra time to themselves, after four months cracks begin to appear, and tensions begin to bubble up. Sustained isolation, lockdowns and restrictions are many things that have direct effects on mental health, which interferes with our natural attachment rhythms in relationships.

For me as a pastor in the last four months I have seen the way that anxiety works its cyclic way in some of our people, latching on to trivial things and making them very pre-occupied and over-analysing every detail. For some it is as if their smoke alarm is permanently on inside their minds thinking a threat is right around the corner. Some with previous histories of abuse have time to think about that again with limited means of distracting themselves from it. I have had several deaths with funerals under Covid-19 conditions, and one suicide of a prominent church member, with ripple effects of that showing itself in wider families and friends.

It is things like this that cause me to be fairly realistic about our church in a post-Covid-19 world. There are of course so many positives along the way in this journey, and ways God has used this particular experience to draw out our spiritual gifts and desires to love and look out for one another. But pastorally we are going to be dealing with a lot of still hurting people. Some will be hesitant to re-engage socially, marriages and parenting will need some repair due to the increased flair-ups of tension and stress, and, as we hear in the media, domestic violence has gone up too.

But rather than be down about this particular future, it actually provides a unique mission opportunity. Although many people are hoping and predicting that Covid-19 will make more non-Christian people come forward and be more open and interested in Jesus again, I am hoping that we as 'wounded healers' in Christ can have more dynamic and flexible grounds to take the initiative to go into homes and families and share our wounds of Covid-19 as well. Christians are not immune from the mental health effects of the Covid-19 experience, but we have the added advantage that we have the Lord Jesus Christ.

He not only soothes and heals our hurts, but he teaches and empowers us to love others through brokenness and vulnerability. The word 'vulnerable' comes from the Latin word *vulnus*, meaning 'wound'. It will, I believe, be our wounds both from Covid-19 and other past hurts that will create a bridge of connection in our mission to others who are suffering both cross-culturally and intergenerationally. In sharing our wounds we can gently and patiently, through sustained relationship, tell people who don't know God, about our amazing saviour Jesus, our ultimate and faithful wound healer.

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