

These notes were first written for an international webinar in May 2020.

Like every other part of Europe and indeed most other countries, the UK has seen almost a complete lockdown, except for essential workers such as the many medical teams. Church services are now being transmitted via YouTube or other social media. These services usually contain a song, a hymn or two, a brief sermon of about 10 minutes, a few prayers and a Bible reading. They last about 45 minutes on average, about half the length of a normal Sunday church service. The BBC is also transmitting a pre-recorded Sunday morning service as well as a number of radio stations.

Some churches have introduced a daily prayer slot, or are providing a children's programme on line once or twice a week. All such seem to be popular and attract those who may well not have visited the relevant church for years! It is, however, mostly all one-way; by and large, it involves only the presenter(s) and a passive audience.

Positives for the media use

Many non-regular church people watching. It would seem that many people in isolation are watching these streamed services at home, many more than usually attend the church in question. While comprehensive statistics are not available, many churches are reporting increases from viewing of 20%, 50% or even 100%. Reports of such come from Catholic, Anglican and Evangelical churches. Numbers tripled in Catholic churches over Easter in Wrexham, Wales, for example. One study said 24% of the population had watched a service.

Advantages of social media viewing. It allows avoidance of unfavourable weather, is much easier for the elderly or disabled to be involved, and you can have a cup of tea alongside you if you wish! Armchairs at home are probably more comfortable than pews. And there are no collections! You can also switch off whenever you like!

Popularity of format. Some say they like the "personal" approach with the preacher as he/she seems just a couple of feet away which means the sermon is more likely to be listened to! It's usually shorter also. It may help bring calm to worried people. Some may be seeking answers from the Christian faith as to why God has sent or allowed this worldwide plague.

Negatives for the media use

Context is very different. This is not, however, a return to the pre-Constantinian era before 300 AD! The situation is of course very different; then people gathered under threat of persecution; today we worship within our own four walls because of governmental decree to stay in our homes. Then they gathered with other families often in secret; today we watch the service openly in our home as a single family or one or two people on their own.

Primacy within the preaching is not known. How far the Gospel is actually being preached is unknown; how many people are coming to faith is unknown; how much this will lead to an increase in congregations when we are allowed to re-gather is unknown.

Middle-class and/or resource dominance. However, huge numbers of churchgoing people, particularly the elderly and less well-off, do not have a smart phone, a tablet or computer. As one person said, "Having been a Christian for 75 years without YouTube, I can probably survive without it a bit longer." Not everyone can afford iphones or understand the intricacies of modern technology.

Long-term impact uncertain. This doesn't replace the connectedness of face-to-face interaction, nor the theological imperative for it, though it might suggest a wider and simpler framework for the future. Nor does it replace loneliness. Nor does everyone have a comfortable home to watch in, or a sympathetic family. Neither does the minister have the opportunity to get to know any of the new people who are engaging with the church through online services.

Usefulness of church buildings. Many people use a church building for private prayer either in a busy city or quiet rural village. The government have ordered all churches, mosques, temples, synagogues, etc. to be closed. Will some people consequently stop their habit of praying in such buildings? Church buildings are also widely used for mid-week meetings and activities both Christian and secular, most of which cannot be replicated on line. For instance, one church before lockdown provided mid-week morning activities for the elderly (usually about 100) followed by a communal cooked lunch, and sometimes a talk after lunch.

Long-term implications

Helpful service supports faith image. Churches which are currently involved in serving their local community, especially with meals, food banks, and other like services, are building an image of love and care. Finance for such is often being donated and volunteers are coming forward. Those which do the most are likely to emerge the stronger, or at least more respected than they were. Catholic priests are much appreciated for being allowed to give end-of-life care while other denominations face internal restrictions.

Subsequent denominational infrastructure. Such ways of working with social media may be helpful when the pandemic is over. Church meetings via Zoom might be shorter and save travel time and some costs, but the vertical component can be fragmented. Equally though, it is unlikely the church will totally swing back to "normal" when the panic is over.

Unanswerable questions abound. How many “regulars” will fail to return to their churches? How many will “change” churches after “discovering” others? How many churches, particularly rural ones, without suitable tech facilities during the pandemic, will find it hard to resume again?

Internationally, some will have noted that (at the time of writing), with only 208 deaths by the end of April and 15,000 cases in a population of 8 million, the Jewish state appears to have weathered the coronavirus far better than other Middle Eastern nations. In addition to practical considerations, is there any spiritual implication in this situation?

God and the Virus

God's intention. Is the virus a punishment or warning sent from God? We can be confident that God is in control. When a worldwide (as far as “worldwide” was understood) famine calamity occurred millennia ago, the pre-Israel family of Jacob was preserved in Egypt by the “lost” member of their family, Joseph, who after being sold into slavery by his hard-hearted brothers had become leader of all Egypt. “You meant it for evil, but God intended it for good,” said Joseph.

Lament or repent? Is the pandemic God's voice urging us to repent before Jesus comes? Former Bishop Tom Wright feels it is more “a call to lament,” a response to the unanswered question “Why?” In the Bible, the Spirit groans, Jesus weeps and God grieves for His creation. The miracle of Dunkirk when King George VI led the nation in a Day of Prayer was based on national repentance and a humble cry for mercy. Only the Presidents of Kenya and Brazil have thus far publicly sought a national Day of Prayer (and Fasting in Brazil) for Covid-19. Has the increasing secularisation of Europe and the UK, their dismissal of God, and rejection of Biblical truth on such issues as same-sex marriage and abortion had any part to play in the severity of Covid-19 across the continent?

Financial implications. Some charities will fail as well as businesses; many will become unemployed. One survey has shown this as a top concern among Americans. We'll need to learn to look at things other than money and “success.” Some of the largest organisations may fail, including major airlines. The impact on the market is impossible to predict. Government's assistance will, of necessity, be limited. “After the disease, the debt,” was one headline.

Especially hard for some. Among the hardest hit will be the dependent young, the elderly and the vulnerable. This is especially true of the many orphans in Africa and other non-Western areas. The impact of the loss of education for say 6 months in lockdown is unknown. Limitation of disabled provision and Care Homes equipment will hit families. Will it provide more fuel for the pro-abortionists? Will it lead to fresh calls for euthanasia? Will people become more conscious of death and the need to prepare for it?

Is coronavirus an impediment or an opportunity for the Gospel?

Virus Statistics

Unconvincing interpretations. Statistics are being pumped out in virtually every news bulletin and daily newspaper in a non-normal intensity. Their reception varies between two extremes – obsessively seeking to absorb and relate to each new statistical revelation (sometimes placing more reliance on, and giving reaction to, than the figures warrant) or totally ignoring each assessment (as either too hard to understand or too depressing). Though aware of statistical uncertainty among the experts, most people seem willing to accept curves and peaks and troughs as reasonable representations of the daily situation.

Not totally universal. By the end of March 2020, out of the 215 countries in the world, only 13 plus a few island nations had not had (or not reported) a single case: Botswana, Burundi, Comoros, Lesotho, North Korea, Malawi, Myanmar, Sao Tome and Principe, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Yemen and the majority of the smaller Pacific Island countries. That's about 10% of world countries with NO coronavirus.

A second peak? The death tally from this pandemic has been horrendous whether in China, Iran, Spain, Italy, the United States or the UK. The rate of deaths seems to follow a clear pattern; relatively few in the first 2 weeks, and then numbers begin to multiply upwards, stay at a high level, and then begin to fall. In a few countries, like Singapore (so far), the numbers stay low for some while and then begin to rise again (the so-called “second peak”).

Need for reliable comparative data. A steady increase to a peak and then a dropping away (a “bell curve”) is familiar from many aspects of life; a second phase is much less so. Country comparisons are not always valid as the same criteria are not used for measurement. “Cases per million population” takes into account the varying size of populations, but not their relative dispersal within their geographical area (so urban areas can show as worse than rural areas).

Total picture please. At the same time other factors need to be measured also. Covid-19 affects men more than women; older people more than young, black people more than white, obese more than non-obese, and so on. Statistics can paint a situation; much wisdom is needed to explain them!