

THE POST-COVID THEOLOGY PROJECT

Worship and Church Life



The Post-Covid Theology Project: Worship & Church Life

The Post-Covid Theology Project has already provided questions and resources in the areas of mission and being human. This third and final section combines reflection in both the life of the church (ecclesiology) and worship (liturgy). There will quite properly be overlap with the previous two sections of the Project. The questions raised by the Project in mission interweave with those aspects of the new hybrid patterns of worship that have reached some, who never would have attended in-building worship.

There are other questions about what forms an authentic Christian life in the new hybrid church which overlap with those questions about the authenticity of online worship and what it means to be human. These questions are rooted in our embodied existence, made so acute by the impact of Covid-19, upon so many aspects of the human body. These questions resonate with the way we 'embody' the Body of Christ as churches and communities.

What is offered here, then, are questions which we suggest are worthy of careful consideration by local churches, parishes, and congregations as we navigate our way out of the severe phase of pandemic into something closer to another endemic infectious disease to accompany those familiar foes of influenza and the common cold.

Perhaps the most striking feature of church life after Covid is the widespread delivery of online worship. What was previously the domain of either the wealthiest of local churches, with the resources of finance and staff time to stream Sunday services, or those communities that delivered worship in an online format exclusively, has become common (although not in those rural areas of the land where broadband is absent, or limited bandwidth precludes the live streaming option.) Lockdown propelled many churches into the digital age, so far as worship is concerned, and for ageing congregations, zoom provided an easy way of connecting that had previously been available only through in-person encounters. The digital incompetence of the older generation was markedly over-estimated, and many became adept and enthusiastic adopters of the new technology.

One of the most challenging aspects of public worship concerns the administration of the sacraments, with practices varying greatly from tradition to tradition. However, the limitations imposed by lockdown has opened a dialogue concerning the theology and practice of administering sacraments when the church is scattered, and which will need to continue as it speaks to the very nature of the church itself. These are questions for national churches as well as local congregations, with church laws often governing how, by whom and for whom the eucharist can be celebrated.

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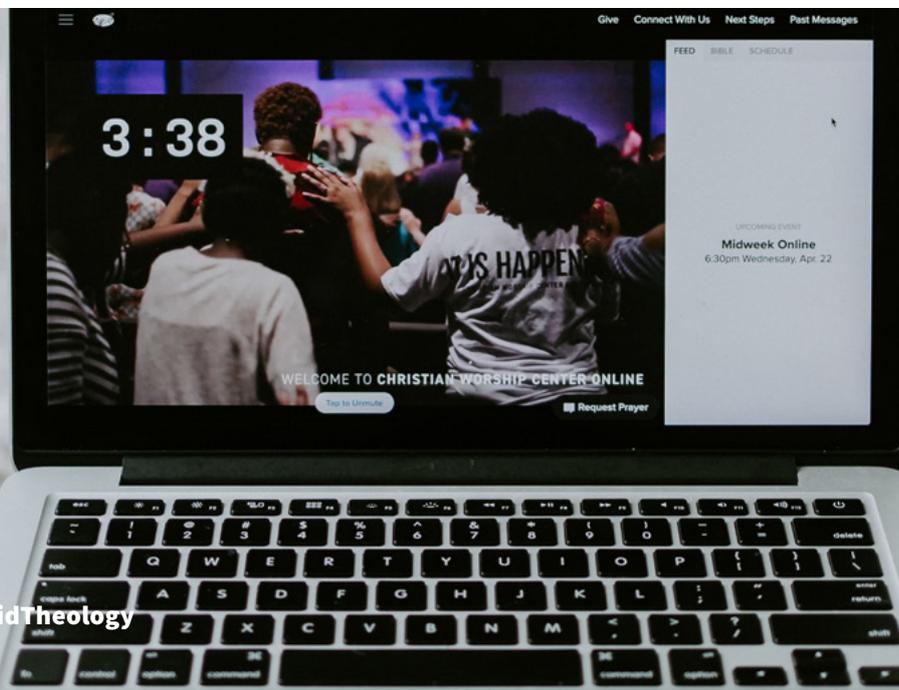
But this is not simply a benefit to the churches (although it undoubtedly is) and the questions raised by this adoption of new digital and hybrid life together are offered in this section of the Project.

We invite reflection on these questions, not to dismiss digital life, or reject out-of-hand hybrid worship, but to become aware of the costs as well as the benefits, and to begin to see how the downsides of digital worship might be mitigated.

The questions fall into two groups — those that are primarily concerned about liturgical matters, and those that are broader in scope. There is also a document with resources which you may find helpful for the continuing conversation.

The following church leaders, theologians and practitioners were involved in developing these questions

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Jonathan Keyworth	Baptist	Minister, New Road Baptist Church, Oxford
Jonny Baker	Anglican	Director of Mission Education, CMS
Claire Turner	Anglican	Vicar of St Chad's Church, Rubery
Pete Leveson	Baptist	Minister, South Norwood Baptist Church
Racheal Adeboye	RCCG	Lecturer, University of Bedfordshire
Timothy Menezes	Catholic	Dean of St Chad's Cathedral
Neil Stubbens	Methodist	Methodist presbyter, Liverpool North
Oliver Cross	Anglican	Rector of All Saints, Northampton
Paul Goodliff	CTE	General Secretary



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Worship

Do we need to continue our online activities now we can regather?

- Are online services seen as a 'gathering' or simply as a broadcast?
- What are the implications of this?
- Is this a missional activity or actually the church? Is it both?
- Is it a stepping-stone to church?
- Does it lead to greater inclusivity or greater marketisation of relationships?

What is the balance between the experience provided by online worship and the opportunities and challenges provided by returning to in-building worship?

- For either experience there are those who will welcome the return to in-building or the continuation, and those who will not, for whom either vehicle is a source of joy or anxiety.

How can the missiological benefits of attending online worship for those who are fearful of entering a church be maintained?

We do not under-estimate the amount of time and effort required to produce online worship compared to in-building.

- How can we support those who provide online worship?
- How can we support and deepen the resilience of those who have provided online worship, with all of its novelty and change?

What can we learn from established online worshipping communities, including their missiology and the resources for supporting those who prepare and deliver online worship?

To what extent is online worship a gathering for worship, and how might the broadcast of it become an event at which observers are more fully participative?

- How can we enable online worship to become appropriately participative for as many as possible?
- What is the genre of worship that suits the aim of the liturgy — community or performance/ broadcast or gathering.
- Who is your congregation? Who attends online but from a distance, and who might be able and wish to attend in-building? What is the purpose of your online community?

Is there a difference between online church and church online?

- The first is predominantly a church community connected almost exclusively digitally, the latter a church that has an online presence.
- Which of these better describes your church?

Meaning comes out of the symbols we employ, and when lived experience bumps up against those symbols. Are there new symbols we need to recognise or create that might accompany the inherited symbols?

- For instance, as the people bring the gifts to the Table/Altar, might a lap-top accompany them in order to bring the online participants closer to the altar?

How can the liturgy we employ take seriously those who are not in the church building, but present virtually?

How significant for our community is actually gathering together for worship — perhaps the greatest symbol and a sacramental event? Is an online 'gathering' the same thing?

Noting that ‘you cannot live-stream Quaker worship’ because it consists in the presence of the Spirit in those gathered in the room, and recognising the presence of God in the other and deep within the participants, what are the implications for those practices of worship that are deeply connective?

- Can this be replicated online? If yes, what enables it?

What is the difference between being silent and being on mute?

- How might a person create the similar circumstances to being in-building when at home, so as to enable worship to be authentic.

How can we recognise that being present in the building will have different frequency and significance for people?

How might we operate at different levels — distant/close up; gathered/dispersed?

Has the pandemic’s restrictions revealed “an addiction” to church buildings and Sunday acts of worship (and do we need a 12-step programme to relinquish this addiction?) and what might this mean for mission?

What have we learnt about sacred space?

- Has the pandemic revealed a stuckness that we need to question?

Has broadcast worship revealed a ‘provider/client’ relationship for worship, with ‘goods and services’ provided by professionals (the church run by a ‘priestly caste’)?

- What does this mean for the church in the world?

How different should the elements of worship differ between online and in-person, or should the goal be equivalence?

What has online worship to say about the sacramental life of the church? Can the elements at Communion be consecrated while dispersed around many tables?

- Who can celebrate?
- What does the withdrawal of the chalice say about clergy celebrant and the rest of the people of God?
- Do we need to re-visit the theology and practice of distribution?
- Who does our current practice and theology exclude?
- What can we learn from those traditions where the words of consecration are spoken over bread and wine in the home?
- Do the present circumstances demand a fresh theology of the sacraments, or does it require a defence of the current practices allowed by canon law?
- Can we find ways to provide the elements to people in their homes accompanied by pastoral visitation?
- How is the presence of Christ be mediated online? Through a phone or lap-top?

How authentic is viewing a recording of an act of public worship?

- How essential is interaction at the time of the liturgy?

What are the implications for the need to issue an invite to online worship (a zoom link or equivalent; Use of a waiting room facility)?

- Who does this exclude?

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Church Life

How do we deal pastorally with people who only connect online?

- How do we reconnect with people who have 'disappeared' through the back door as a result of this crisis?
- What does this say about us seeing church as a building?
- What is a parish in this new world?

How do we retain a greater level of congregational involvement that we experienced online in our activities going forward?

What actually is an authentic Christian life in the new hybrid world?

- How does this work out with regard to sacraments, relationships, mission, discipleship, etc?

What is our response to the consumerism that we have observed (i.e., people selecting which online service they will connect to)?

- Has online worship revealed a community of consumers who go where the worship is 'best' in a way that is easier than the traditional 'church hopping'?
- Has this experience encouraged a consumer mentality?

How do we manage the situation where some just want to get back to normal, and others see the crisis as an opportunity to relaunch what we do as churches?

- How can we assess the pastoral challenges of those who will not return to in-building worship?
- How do we balance the demands of some to remain very cautious and others who want a swift casting-off of all restraint?

How do we retain and build upon the social capital we have accumulated from allowing our buildings to be used for the community such as vaccination centres?

How do we engage with care homes going forward given the challenges of doing so during the crisis?

This applies to other areas of chaplaincy also (hospital, urban, army, sport, etc.).

How do we relate to changing work and leisure patterns in the lives of our congregants that the crisis has engineered?

- Is this stratified according to eco-social position of congregants within society?

How has the experience of the crisis been a springboard for greater ecumenical working locally and nationally?

In what ways has local ecumenical encounter and collaboration been diminished?

How do we respond to the Brexit effect that has been largely masked by the crisis?

- Does this also apply to other challenges such as climate change?

How do we respond to the different effect the crisis has had across the United Kingdom (North / South divide, nationalism, independence, etc.)?

How much should the government be allowed to legislate with regard to the worship and practice of the churches and other faiths and how much civil disobedience / resistance is acceptable?

How can the churches prepare for such crises in the future and how do we engender the church as a place of grace?

What do we need to learn about different modes of giving financially to the church, so that we are less dependent upon attendance and cash?