

## How Covid-19 may have Changed the Church Forever!

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COVID-19 has changed the Church forever! Historians and commentators often preface their remarks with a statement along these lines and often it is very much a statement of the obvious. However, when we found ourselves experiencing the first lockdown in March 2020, it was not at all obvious that COVID-19 would be one such defining moment either for the Church at large, or for the Church of England in particular.

A year on however, it does very much feel that this is the case.

In some ways the churches have had similar experiences to society at large and trends already being felt have now accelerated in ways that now seem unstoppable. On 1<sup>st</sup> February the *Church Times* carried an article by Hattie Williams, "Financial Crisis threatens Church's strategic plans". In her first sentence, she said: "Declining income, accelerated by the pandemic, means that dioceses are facing "indiscriminate cuts" to clergy posts, undermining the Church of England's attempts at strategic reform."

She referred to a discussion paper circulated to bishops and diocesan secretaries with stark warnings about the financial difficulties facing the Church. Clergy numbers will have to be cut with the likelihood that increasing numbers of church buildings will become redundant.

During the last year since the end of March 2020, some churches have had no physical services at all, while most have only had a very few during the late summer and autumn. Unsurprisingly, given the continuing dependence of many churches on plate collections at services, income has plummeted. Although this has been mitigated somewhat by the mothballing of plant, many expenses have continued regardless. In this, the churches share much of the experiences of the hospitality and entertainments/arts industries.

### Going on-line

But all is not doom and gloom. Services have gone on-line and, in some cases, have attracted new members, or at least new attendees. No doubt people have shopped around and found services that appealed to them more than the offering provided by their home church. House groups, prayer and Bible study have gone on-line too, making attendance for many much easier than when the expectation was to turn out on a cold, dark winter's night!

Quite apart from the financial aspects church people have desperately missed seeing their church family in the flesh. Although many have embraced zoom and other technical gizmos to enable fellowship to continue, for a significant number of our very disabled or very elderly friends, this has been no answer. As with the general population, many have found themselves isolated at home, unable to receive the sacrament for long periods and unable to meet their fellow Christians to worship, pray and chat. They are a stoic generation however, and rarely complain!

Cathedrals and some of the larger churches have broadcast their normal services on YouTube or Facebook and the combination of music and grand liturgy has continued to have a following on-line as it did in the flesh. The management of Bible study, Lent groups etc. seems to have proved more

difficult for cathedrals than for smaller churches – however the reception of internet offerings will have varied from place to place as in parishes generally.

Churches quickly set up on-line donate buttons on their websites and Facebook pages, but on the whole this has not in any way made up for the loss of plate income.

In some churches they have been able to support the crushing need for foodbanks and community fridges. This has involved cooperation with secular organisations and was probably happening long before Covid, but the needs of people taken to the edge by the pandemic has raised the game considerably. This cooperation between charities and local government bodes well for the value placed on churches by their neighbours and should lead to a fostering of greater community spirit in the future.

### **How have the charities done?**

And what about other charities which have suffered similar drastic falls in their income during the pandemic? Charity shops have closed and big fundraising events have been cancelled. Meanwhile some charities, in particular ones connected with the NHS have benefitted enormously from people's generosity and gratitude. The National Trust has announced huge redundancies much to the dismay of their volunteers and supporters. Some organisations have benefitted from the Government's Culture Recovery Fund. So, a number of rural churches and redundant churches have been able to bring forward planned work to keep our historic heritage safe for future generations and take advantage of the enforced closure of public spaces.

The Churches Conservation Trust (CCT) has been one organisation which has taken the opportunity of lockdown to raise their profile through a series of free lectures. Huge numbers of people have logged onto their weekly lecture either live or on YouTube and a significant number have made donations which have helped plug the covid gap. More importantly these lectures have considerably raised the Trust's profile and hopefully engendered greater interest in the work they do and the historical buildings they represent.

### **What does the future look like?**

As lockdown eases and everyone hopes to get back to the "new normal" what will this mean for parish life, the finances of the churches, mission?

With regard to technology, it is clear that some things have indeed changed forever. Many churches will want to continue to share their services on line via zoom and Facebook, even after we are allowed to meet again in person. As increasing numbers of our congregations are now tech-savvy, it will be a huge boon to be able to take advantage of on-line services or house groups when we are sick or the weather is inclement and we would rather attend church virtually. Some people may even prefer to do this always. However, for most people we do need actual opportunities to meet, to greet one another, and even hug each other in love and sympathy and share communion together.

Many of the meetings we attend will probably stay on-line, especially when members are geographically spread about and the costs, both in money and, environmentally, of travel, would suggest that meeting virtually should become the norm. But, in other cases it will be the physical meetings which work best – it is hard to debate on zoom and hard to be sure everyone is both hearing and heard. Communion really does need to be in person!

As time goes on, we will manage more and more of our finances on-line. Already most of us happily bank and pay bills on-line. We are getting used to giving to good causes and buying tickets on-line.

Some churches may still have a way to travel in getting used to the cashless society, but by the time we have returned to meeting in person, it is likely that many people will have given up carrying cash altogether. Plate collections may become a thing of the past. Instead all churches, not just the few which cater for tourists, will have a QR code point which people can use to donate via mobile phone, or a credit/debit card point.

Personally, I have enjoyed the CCT and other on-line lectures and rather hope they will continue after lockdown ends. At any rate lectures can be used as a fundraising tool in different ways. EAs well as talks, there are concerts from churches and cathedrals and virtual tours of historic buildings can be offered. The opportunities are endless!

### **How else should we cash-in on our assets**

Urban churches have huge opportunities to collaborate and cooperate with other groups in their localities, both secular and religious. This is not high tech, but rather old-fashioned networking, looking beyond the narrow boundaries of church to the wider community beyond. Churches were the focal point of the community in times past, now we know that they can play their part in community building again.

In the Middle Ages, the nave of the church belonged to the people, while the chancel and sanctuary were the preserve of the clergy. Thus, the body of the church was used for all sorts of things in addition to church services. Ales were held to raise money for good causes – candles for the various altars, the poor, the fabric of the church etc. Nowadays, some of the more modern buildings have been designed with multi-function in mind, so work well for fund-raising events such as Christmas fairs, study days, even wedding parties or funeral wakes. Not all churches are free to develop multi-functionality in this way, but where they can, it should certainly be considered as an opportunity to open the church doors to the wider community.

The Church has a mission to be welcoming and widen their church family as well as engage with the community in which they find themselves. The opportunities to do this have never been better so I very much hope that congregations will get into conversation with their neighbours so they can find ways of supporting and being fully part of their local communities.

Historic churches are often found in rural areas within small villages, or even sometimes not in a village at all. Some are already in the care of the CCT or some other heritage body, while those which still serve an active worshipping community may be felt as a huge burden on the few who are on the electoral roll. Sometimes members of the local community who love the church building, but who are not members of the faith community have rallied round and developed friends' groups to fund raise and develop new uses for their parish church beyond the needs of worshippers.

National Churches Trust: <https://www.nationalchurchestrust.org/about-us> is an umbrella organisation for all churches and chapels to help support church buildings in need of aid. Perhaps this organisation could extend its remit in collaboration with other church buildings charities to broaden its profile and draw in a wider supporting public.

If the membership model were developed, entry could be by a smartphone app or smart membership card, with other visitors being expected to pay for entry by credit card. Entry to the building would trigger the CCTV which can be monitored remotely, so the building is open during the day with greater security and an income is provided.

## Churches for the good of all

Our increasingly secular nation still needs churches. Clergy are welcomed for support and comfort when disasters strike, such as Grenfell Tower. Volunteers are in demand to help with foodbanks and provide help for refugees and homeless people.

Does this mean that Christians only have a social calling, or can we find ways in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to tell our story? We can and do present our story through our good works, but our buildings are an enormous, barely tapped, asset, which we need to use. We can contribute to a better understanding of our church history and cultural history through inviting all-comers into our buildings to see the art treasures we have and the environmental treasures which are in many churchyards, as well as holy wells, historical monuments and gravestones, and peace. Greater familiarity with the inside of churches and their stories will surely help us to tell the Good News of the Gospel!

To return to the *Church Times* of 1<sup>st</sup> February and the discussion paper *Perspectives on Money, People and Buildings* quoted, there are clearly many challenges facing the Church of England and the other churches as well as most charities as a result of Covid. We do not know how long the challenges of the disease will continue and it is right to consider all possible options in challenging times. But newly trained ordinands and indeed all clergy must not be treated as expendable, but instead nourished and encouraged. After all, people are always the most vital asset any organisation has!

It would equally be right for the training of clergy to be looked at long and hard to see first of all whether the right people are being recruited and secondly whether the training itself is actually fit for purpose. This approach also applies to the laity, some of whom have been disturbed by the apparent clericalization of their roles.

If the churches survive the challenge of secularism, it will be because they have shown themselves to be open and welcoming to all comers, both in worship and in a wider context of sharing.

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