

Meeting as Church after Covid-19

Why change from following online services at home?

Covid-19 is here to stay. It is another serious threat humanity is learning to live with. This morning I read a thought provoking article in my local newspaper about the future of high street shopping. During these last two years of lockdowns and physical limitations, web shops have grown in popularity. Online shopping is available day and night, it makes products and suppliers easier to compare, you don't lose time going, queuing and coming back, no parking fees... and the prices are very competitive. Why would customers want to return to high street shopping? City planners, sociologists and shop owners are clearly concerned. They propose creative ways to make high street shopping an interesting and engaging *experience*. We Christians must also awake to the new opportunities and challenges that lay before us. Change has happened.



The advantages of being able to follow a church service on a screen at home are numerous. The choice is wide – we can choose the topic and teaching style that best suits us. Depending on the weather and other family activities, we can watch our local church service now, or this afternoon, or perhaps later in the week. We can fast-forward when the song being sung is not 'my taste' or when we lose interest in what the preacher is saying. We are in control of our church experience.

We have moved away from the one-service-fits-all church. Surely, a church service with its elements selected by *me* to fit *my* personal circumstances, needs and preferences must be the best possible church experience. Furthermore, I need not get up so early on a Sunday, I can let the children sleep or play, I can sit in pyjamas on my favourite living room chair and sometimes even enjoy my breakfast while watching the service. It reduces travels costs and reduces my carbon foot print. When I think of spiritual realities, I am sure that God is not restricted to a church building, that I can worship Him in my home and He can speak and touch me also in my living room. These observations are all true. What then does the future of your local church look like? Why change from following online services at home?

Five benefits of meeting physically

Conversion is an individual matter. Repentance of sin is also personal. When teaching on prayer, Jesus said, "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Mat 6:6). God clearly sees us and loves us as individuals. But there is more. He sees me as His son but also as a member of His family (Gal 6:10). Community is an essential part of being church. We need each other. That is why following online church service at home can *never* replace meeting physically. Consider the following blessings connected with meeting together.

1. A rhythmic event: Most of nature runs on rhythms. Crops have harvest seasons, animals have breeding seasons, the moon and the planets have their regular circuits. We humans also benefit from rhythms, regular times to eat, sleep, sport and even brush our teeth. If we are to learn to play a musical instrument, a language, sport or some other new skill, we usually benefit from daily, weekly or monthly rhythms. And these rhythms are usually encouraged or reenforced by events, such as exhibitions, concerts, competitions and examinations. Similarly, our spiritual life and that of our family will also benefit from healthy rhythms and events. Many testify of the benefit of *daily rhythms* such as their personal devotional time, praying together as a couple before going to bed, thanking God before meals or reading some Scripture together at the table.

A weekly rhythm: A pattern of a seven day week is evident in Scripture since creation. The Israelites were required to keep the last day of the week special, to devote it to God, rest, family relationships, self-reflection and the like. To protect it, God referred to this day as "My sabbath" (Ex 31:13). Unlike many other commandments, the law enforcing the Sabbath rhythm is not repeated in the New Testament. We notice, however, a shift in importance from the last to the first day of the week. On Sunday the Lord Jesus resurrected from the dead (Lk 24:1). On Sunday He appeared to His disciples saying "Peace be among you!" and then breathed on them and said "Receive the Holy Spirit" (Jn 20:21-22). After initially meeting daily, it appears that believers begun to meet as church on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2). Towards the end of his life, the apostle John refers to this day as "the Lord's day" (Rev 1:10). For the Christian, Sunday has similarities but also significant differences with the Jewish Saturday (Gal 4:9-10; Col 2:16). Unlike the Sabbath, the Sunday is not characterized in Scripture by a list of prohibited activities. Sunday became a day in which the Lord Jesus had a special place: "the Lord's day". We will also benefit by making and keeping it special. Giving Sunday a special place in church life does not exclude other planned or spontaneous moments of fellowship throughout the week.

An event: The appointment to meet together as church in an agreed place and time has an important spiritual and social dimension. The place may be a home-church, school-hall or church building. Personally I experience the dynamic of getting physically, mentally and spiritually ready to leave my home and make my way to meet the Lord together with fellow believers as something good and helpful. Meeting my brothers and sisters on Sunday is an *event*, not only in my diary but also in my heart. My wife and I have been blessed with four children. Getting the family ready to go to church on Sunday requires energy and dedication. But the weekly rhythm you bring into your family life will be richly rewarded. Without such a rhythm, every Sunday morning will become a family discussion with alternative proposals on how to spend that particular day. In our family, such suggestions were welcome, but we focussed on what we do *after* the church meeting.

2. A fellowship experience: Today we can keep in touch via social media. The Covid-19 restrictions have forced us to learn to interact with each other using screens. My elderly parents have been confined to their small flat in London for over a year. They have relied heavily on online church meetings and Zoom encounters. Digital fellowship is like eating a microwaved ready-made-meal. It helps. It's better than nothing. But we all prefer a freshly cooked meal or a garden barbeque with friends! Where necessary, let's keep in touch digitally, but let's not feel satisfied with it. Meeting others in person does us good. As someone pointed out with a smile: when God said "It is not good for a man to be alone", He did not give Adam a laptop or a mobile phone but a fellow human being!

The first generation of Christians felt a need to meet together, "They all joined together constantly in prayer" (Acts 1:14). Being a Christian then became dangerous. At home they could also be united in spirit and in purpose. And yet they took the risk and made the effort to meet physically. Yes, initially they met in the temple courts and later more discretely in homes (Acts 2:46; Rom 16:5; Phil 1:2). These physical acts of meeting together, greeting each other, singing together, worshipping together build us up. By interacting with each other, waiting for each other, yielding to the preference of others and forgiving each other we grow in Christian character. Together as church community, we can show by the way we interact that we love each other (1 Pet 2:17), that we do not discriminate (Ja 2:1-4), that we are a family (Gal 6:10). Together as church community we can make visitors feel welcome (Acts 15:4). Meeting together is an essential part of being a Christian. That is why these early Christians "devoted themselves" also to "fellowship" (Acts 2:42).

3. An experience of God's presence: God has always been *omni-present*, that is, He exists and may be found everywhere. In Scripture we read that God met Adam and Eve in a garden, Abraham in a pagan city, Moses in a burning bush, Jonah inside a big fish, Philip in a desert, Paul in a prison, and so on. Happily we may experience God's presence when alone, for example as we worship or read Scripture at home. But we can also experience God's presence when we meet together as church. "After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly" (Acts 4:31). Often God's Spirit works in a distinctive way when we are together.

In the Old Testament God links a special experience of His presence to the *tabernacle* and the *temple*. In the New Testament Jesus links a special experience of His presence – through the Holy Spirit – when we come together as *church* (1 Cor 14). Where is the Lord Jesus today? At the right hand of God the Father (Acts 2:32,33). He resides likewise in every heart that is open to Him (Rev 3:20). He also made it clear to His disciples that "where two or three gather in my name, *there am I with them*" (Mat 18:20). Yes, the Lord Jesus is with us at home, at work and at school. But in some very real, special and *different* sense, He is present when the church meets in His name. I use the word 'different' because otherwise these words of Jesus do not make sense. We are invited to expect to experience something special when we come together in His name to pray, to worship and to hear Him speak through His word. Most Christians, in their own way, remember some distinct moment when the Lord spoke to their mind or heart, gave them new hope, strength, vision or joy, or touched them in some other way during a church meeting. We may miss that type of experience if we choose to stay at home.

4. A witness opportunity: Our western culture is becoming more and more individualistic. We value independence and personal choices. At the same time loneliness is a growing problem. There are many social and ideological communities which you can join

and leave whenever you like. Without commitment, community will only be a word. The local church is designed to be a family, a community of believers. There are different ways in which we show the world that we belong to the family of God. Jesus said that we should let our “light shine before others” by our good deeds (Mat 5:16). He also explained that we show the world that we are Christians by the way we interact with each other: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). Of course we can show our love and commitment to each other digitally and also during the week. But when we let our unity be seen as we meet as church, with our different temperaments, preferences, ages and cultures, we become a living witness of what Christ does in the lives of people.

This harmony in diversity is more than a social miracle. The apostle Paul explains how “enquirers or unbelievers” who may visit our meetings may be touched by God’s Spirit. Through a song or a spoken word, “they are convicted of sin... as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare. So they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you!’” (1 Cor 14:23-25). Meeting together as church can be a beautiful and effective witness opportunity.

5. A ‘being used’ experience: Some label as ‘selfish’ those who choose not to be present at church meetings. This may well be true for some, but others may choose to stay at home because they are fearful, hurt, sick or must work. Clearly there are also some who do not understand or appreciate their unique place and function within the body of Christ. At the moment of conversion, “we were all baptised by one Spirit so as to form one body... Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Cor 12:13,27). We are explicitly told that each member is needed. You too. Christ desires to express Himself through you. He desires to bless others through you. Through a smile, a greeting, an empathetic listening ear. Through you ‘being there’. We are body of Christ all the time. But when we physically meet each other, Christ’s body moves in a special way.

From an organisational perspective, a local church may distinguish between elders (overseers), deacons and “all the saints in Christ Jesus” (Fil 1:1). From a ministry perspective, Jesus, as Head of His church, has given gifted men and women “to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph 4:12-13). From a worship perspective, every believer belongs to the “royal priesthood” and can “declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). Each of us has a role in sustaining church life, be it in organisation, ministry, worship or a mix of these. Meeting physically facilitates and enhances our contribution to church life. This is evident in church meetings that encourage and welcome broad and diverse participation (1 Cor 14:26-39). How do you prepare your heart for church meetings? Express to the Lord your open disposition to receive (from Him and others) but also to give (to Him and others). If you arrive willing to be used, you are more likely to see opportunities, sense the promptings of the Holy Spirit to use you to say something, to encourage, to be a blessing to those present. “If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 4:11). Come with a determined willingness to serve, to give, to let yourself be used.

The future of online church services

During these last two years many congregations have purchased equipment and developed expertise to stream their services online. Screen teaching, screen singing and screen church are here to stay. Some congregations are choosing to discontinue their online services in order to force church members to leave the comfort of their homes and meet physically. Perhaps

this may work with some. But I expect many will simply follow the service of another church or simply not have one. The sick, elderly, those looking after small children or those away travelling may well appreciate following their usual church-service on their screen at home, in the hospital or in a hotel room. For these people it may be worthwhile continuing the recording or livestreaming of the services. Meeting together physically should be theologically and practically motivated rather than forced. This may take explaining and patience. The act of freely choosing to prioritise physical over digital meeting is a growth step in itself.

Conclusion

The Lord can speak and encourage us through both digital and physical meetings. He can also rebuke and correct us through reading books or listening to a podcast in our car on the way to work. But there are at least five good reasons to prefer physical to digital church meetings. The writer to the Hebrews is quite adamant: “And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds, *not giving up meeting together*, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb. 10:24-15). Do you “see the Day approaching”? During the Covid-19 pandemic months, we have seen how democratic governments have discovered that fear and technology are powerful tools to enhance social control. They have done things in society that we never thought possible two years ago. Clearly “the Day” is approaching. We have today a stronger reason than before this pandemic to meet together, to encourage and spur each other on.

Maybe it is time to rethink your priorities and your weekly rhythm, time to choose to let the Lord use you to bless others as you physically meet with them as church. Be creative. Choose to make meeting as church feel like an event, a highlight of your week, something to look forward to rather than something you squeeze in. Maybe for the first time, or as before, your first day of the week will have that special “Lord’s day” feeling to it!

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