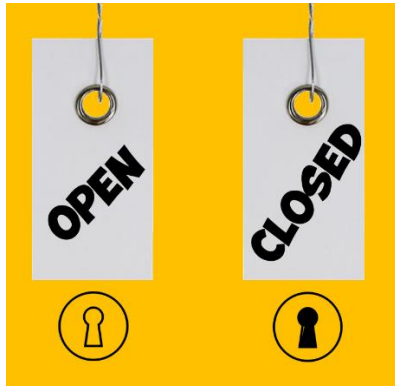


LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER:



I have been listening to a number of pastors and conversations from leaders in our CCCNZ movement and would like to share some of the thinking that has emerged out of this COVID-19 lockdown. These issues are what our good people are wrestling with and I hope you gain clearer insights into some difficult decisions before our churches.

These are some of their comments:

Sterilizing our Churches:

How much is this going to cost us in time and materials?

Our church is cleaned by volunteers and most of them are retired and over 70. Will they be allowed to clean? Would they manage three 'deep' cleans a week because we have others using our building?

Would the health of our seniors be compromised if those over 70 are our primary cleaners?

Our income has been reduced during this 'lockdown' period. How much of our budget is needed to buy sanitizers for every room and products that give everyone peace of mind?

If a visitor comes to church, do we have to get all their details for contact-tracing? Is that allowed?

The 100 benchmark:

The police are saying they will 'enforce' the meetings where 100 will gather. What does that mean?

Will we need permission from the police to prove we can meet at 2-metres distancing?

If we can seat 100 people, we will only have room for 20 with 2-metre distancing requirements.

For us, it is not worth doing two or three services for 20 people when we can do one service and have everyone join us live/online.

For now, we could do different services on different days e.g. Sundays for families, Tuesdays for seniors, Thursday nights for Teenagers, but we don't think we could sustain that.

When we meet, we want our whole church family to meet. We would rather wait now in order to enjoy real fellowship and worship in the not too distant future.

Will people return to church?

We think our people will be really eager to return to meeting together.

Some of our people are hesitant to come together. In particular, our older folk feel vulnerable and are anxious that the virus could get them.

The older ones I've talked with say they will probably wait until after winter to rejoin. They are happy enough feeling safe at home and watching online.

One older person told me they would love to come back but would worry about the children running everywhere, not social-distancing and touching everything.

The last thing we want is for people to be in church and be suspicious of everyone else, especially if others are coughing! Winter is coming and we always have people with allergy reactions.

The new reality is that some of our people will now become 'digital' members. They will join our online services but we won't see them.

Right now, the best thing we have is Home Groups. People can meet in small numbers and can easily be tracked and traced. We have got to invest in the people that lead these Home Groups because at the moment, they are leading the church!

I think there will be people desperate to be part of the church family again. Some people love being close and hugged and are feeling quite isolated right now. I guess, it's the hugging and closeness that our health officials are worried that could cause further transmissions!

Some have expressed concern about singing. Isn't that where saliva can become atmospheric and nasties can become air born? Maybe we should have no singing when we come together!

Are you kidding? I can hardly wait to sing my lungs out and collectively worship together by raising our voices!

We are very aware that our local town is watching what we choose to do. We don't want to alarm them that our numbers are gathering in the church, then on Monday are back in the community. For us to start too early would be detrimental to our respected witness here.

Have online communications been a good or bad thing?

We are functioning well with our online connections. They have attracted people that would not normally attend church.

At first we wondered if people would even watch our local speakers, knowing that there are plenty of other international speakers to choose from off the internet.

We were pleasantly surprised by how many people have tuned in and are grateful for the effort we have made.

The problem with online/digital services is that people will become complacent and lazy.

Digital services make it easy to go to church in your slippers but that does not create community.

People have discovered that there is a huge selection of speakers and messages online and this could mean that they become followers of their favourite speaker rather than a follower of Jesus.

Zoom has transformed our prayer meetings. We now have more people joining us to pray than ever before. It's great.

How has leadership coped with the COVID-19 crisis?

Our leaders have been great. They have been active in communicating via phone calls or small devotions online. People have been very grateful in seeing familiar faces each week.

We could have done better. The technology was all so new and we were out of our depth so didn't start anything until we came across 'zoom'. Once we got onto that we were grateful that we could now connect and see each other. Of course, some had no ability to connect and we couldn't go to them to get things set up. Others were resistant to 'change' so we have yet to see them.

I haven't had one phone call from any of the elders. Either they are too busy or don't care.

I would have liked to have seen our elders contribute more and show leadership, rather than have a Youtube speaker. I felt they were babysitting me because I can watch a Youtube speaker anytime. During this time, I needed to see people I respect and can trust and who know what I am going through.

We delegated all online content to the Pastor. That's what we pay him for.

I think that those over 45 see this crisis quite differently than those under 45. Those over 45 tend to be the ones who contribute the most (financially) to the church and so we listen to them. Do those under the age of 45 have a voice in the decisions being made?

I imagine when church returns people will be hoping for 'back to normal', but I believe the church will be different just as the world is already different. We are going to be facing questions and ideas that we have never ever considered. This could be an exciting new 'wave' for the church.

My leaders have been lazy. They have not communicated online with us in any form.

Political views:

I'm worried that in these unprecedented times that new precedents will come upon us which will be unfair, biased and against the church.

The government has exceeded and abused its 'Emergency Powers' and clearly wants to close, or at least control the church.

Our civil liberties have been undermined and the church is wrong to remain passive.

Active trust means that we must be willing to ask the hard questions as to why the government has restricted church activities while opening more prolific public spaces to the transmission of COVID-19.

Our problem is we do not have a voice in Parliament. Who represents the CCCNZ among our politicians? Would we want someone outside of our network representing us? Is our autonomy a position that makes unity almost impossible?

Political parties are using the closing of the church issue to score political points.

I have big concerns that the contact-tracing app invades our privacy and will become a tool in shutting down church-related activities.

I've got nothing to hide! I have no problem with the government knowing where I am and what I am doing.

This clash of church and state has brought to the surface the issue that we must stay alert to any future decisions that would undermine the fundamental rights and freedoms that we have experienced for so long.

I hesitate **to summarize these discussions** because they are ongoing...

However, it is easy to see there are complexities, questions and for some, bewilderment as to what to do in the days to come. There is also a sense of hope and excitement before a portion of our leaders.

There appear to be two perspectives:

1. One group is 'chomping at the bit' to meet together and begin face-to-face fellowship, care and ministry with their church family and community. This group believes they can make the necessary adjustments to their services and still provide a safe and positive environment for their people. They have the know-how and desire to keep using digital communication to reach many.
2. The other group is hesitant, fearing it may compromise the health and well-being of their church family. They feel somewhat inadequate to the demands upon them and are prepared to wait it out until they can meet in a type of normality. They struggle with digital communications and yet have valued what they have been using. Maybe they will 'have to' use technology in the future.

Some are very pleased to have gained new 'virtual attendees' and know they must be followed up. Others think they may have lost members as a result of not being able to make contact. There are churches who know they will have to adjust and make changes while some just want to return to their 'normal'. It seems apparent that the world has changed and that the body of Christ will not be able to go back to its normal form and function. The lockdown period has been filled with both opportunities and frustrations.

Which group is right? I do not know. Time will reveal it all. What I can do is pray. I will be praying that each church experiences God's blessing and peace upon their responses to COVID-19. Now is definitely not the time to be waving the finger, demanding and expecting others to follow the lead. **Judging other churches responses is unhealthy and negative which will only lead to division and disarray.** I am also praying that no 'Lone Ranger' decides to use this season as a time and place to advance their own selfish agenda. As Paul said with true insight, *"The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love"* (Gal. 5:6).

If the CCCNZ churches are going to make a positive gospel influence in New Zealand and beyond in the days ahead, we must unitedly walk in faith, trust each other and be committed to 'Together Is Better'. I truly believe, COVID-19 virus or not, walking on our knees, the church will bless this land and our people.

Blessings as you too ponder these things.

Graham Ashby

This link is to an excellent UK article explaining that churches are not rushing to open their doors: <https://www.eauk.org/news-and-views/the-media-have-it-wrong-churches-are-not-rushing-to-open-their-doors?fbclid=IwAR3NnMyNAoBQo4GrP2c-aJBgoE8w053IAzCYzh95Ize86fp0hkZ7Z7493uY>

In the USA some churches have opened and then closed again. This article explains what happened: https://churchleaders.com/news/376012-holy-ghost-church-catoosa-baptist-close-again.html?utm_source=outreach-cl-daily-nl&utm_medium=email&utm_content=text-link&utm_campaign=cl-daily-nl&maropost_id=&mpweb=256-8882380-743178161