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Post-COVID-19: Will We Socially Distance Church?

During the quarantine, to some extent, we've all become shut-ins. Many churches have streamed worship live or prerecorded. Recently, I saw the worldwide phenomenon the *U.K. Blessing* online. It was awesome to see so many of our friends, leaders from the Renewal Movement churches we visit in England during our annual trips. Wow! All those people, singing together, apart! Challenges produce creativity!

My wife, Janet, and I live up the driveway from our daughter and son-in-law and their two girls. Our "new normal" routine is to get up each Sunday morning, take our temperatures, and head to our weekly video feed worship in our kids' basement.

We walk in the door, our daughter hands each of us a coffee with our favorite creamer, and then we fill our plates with coffee cake and other goodies. The kids reserve the two huge La-Z-Boy-type chairs for my wife and for me. First, we watch—on the big screen—our son, Jon, preach his recorded message from St. Mark's Lutheran Church. Then we watch "Worship from the Parsonage" with Emily and Pastor Jason from St. Joseph United Methodist Church. As I have gotten used to this experience, I actually joked, "Yeah, I could get used to this!" Or could I?

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Isolation Versus Community

During the only pandemic most of us have ever experienced, we have been forced into technological “fellowship.” The electronic blessings are great, at some level. We at least get worship. Think of those believers back in 1918 during that pandemic. They were *really* isolated, even from worship.

So, the conversation continues. We’ve had our Zoom meetings. Why not Zoom church? What about downloaded worship? You could sleep in and watch on your schedule, in your pajamas.

Just think how you could save on church expenses! Who needs to walk from a parking lot? Who needs a parking lot? For that matter, who needs a church building? One preacher could replace a hundred. Pick an awesome preacher and some great worship musicians, and just do worship.tv! It could be the wave of the future. Yet....

Community

God once said: “It’s not good that man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18). What does that say, what does He imply, about the human creature? You *can* live alone, like a hermit in the wilderness. Yet, is that God’s Plan A for everyone?

You can worship God by yourself, socially distanced. However, is that the best? What do you lose, alone? What do you gain in community? What can believers accomplish together that would never occur in a world of privatized Christianity?

On several occasions, I have visited the Vatican in Rome. One of my favorite places to visit is the Sistine Chapel. Years ago, I was there with my wife and two teenage kids. I stared at the ceiling for close to an hour. Finally, my wife gently nudged me, “The kids are restless; can we go now?”

My point? Michelangelo did the whole ceiling *alone*. Yet, there is much more. At the very center of that masterpiece is God. However, not alone. Reaching his arm out and touching the finger of Adam.

You can be high-tech, but there is something wholesome about high-touch. When the Apostle Paul was winding up his 16-chapter letter to the church at Rome, he said, “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (16:16). When I heard that in Sunday school, I thought, “What a weird church.” However, by the time I was in high school, I thought it might be pretty cool.

Actually, it was a *holy* kiss. It is still a Middle Eastern custom today. Even men greet one another with a kiss on each cheek. It is a high-touch culture.

For Jews in the church at Rome, that was a natural greeting. But not for sophisticated Romans. Think about it: Rome was a culture where gladiators killed each other for sport. Yet, the Roman Jesus-followers came together as *family*—beyond their own family. In Western culture, the high-touch element might be a holy hug.

No-Handshake Society

So, here we are in a no-touch world. Yet, as we have heard over and over again, “We’ll get through this *together*.” Jesus and the disciples were all about community. The Lord’s Supper is high-touch fellowship.

Not every touch is holy. Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss. It was, literally, the kiss of death! But, the death of Jesus—and His resurrection—was the touch of eternal life.

What do you think about heaven? Will it be spiritual cold shoulders, or an eternal hugfest? Or maybe we'll be so complete, we won't need the touch, the encouragement, the love.

Beyond Survival

I recently read somewhere, "You can survive alone, but you need others to flourish." Sometimes, when Jesus healed people, He touched them. He even touched lepers! He didn't have to do it. He could just say the words to heal them.

There are still many people in the healing process from COVID-19. As communities and regions open up, there will be a season of touch hesitancy. But it cannot last. When we gather for worship, we become unlike any other form of human gathering. We are family. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. We are connected as parts of the body of Christ.

When sports teams win, no matter the gender, no matter the sweat, no matter the smell—they embrace in victory. As Christ has won the victory, we celebrate. We are bound together. Men hug men. Women hug women. Men hug my wife. Adults hug kids. And some shake hands. Others pat on the shoulder or back. It's all safe. It's all healthy. It's all *powerful*.

We are not just human doings. We are human beings. By the healing power of Jesus, we touch; He heals. It will come. And you will be *spiritually* healed.

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